

Nazuna Miki

Art by Subachi

3

**MY UNIQUE
SKILL MAKES
ME OP
LEVEL 1**

EVEN AT





Nazuna Miki
Art by Subachi

3

**MY UNIQUE
SKILL MAKES
ME OP
LEVEL 1**

EVEN AT



65. Envoy from a Resort City

I woke up early and went down from my third-floor bedroom to the second-floor living room. Emily, who was in the kitchen, turned and greeted me with a smile.

“Good morning.”

“Morning... Where’s Celeste?”

“She went out with Eve. Thanks to the Harvest Festival, fewer adventurers are in the dungeons. Eve is having her make lots of carrots with her magic.”

“I see. Celeste is pretty good for mass production as long as she can get her drops to E.”

I sat at the table and drank some of the tea Emily brought. The three-day-long Harvest Festival was about to begin today.

“So Cyclo only holds the festival once a year?” I asked.

“That’s right. I hear people even come from other cities to take part. It draws crowds, so people put on programs using items from elsewhere to recruit adventurers.”

“How do they do that?”

“They’ll bring drops from other dungeons. Supposedly, they either sell them or turn them into outsiders to show off that their dungeon or city is a great place to make money.”

“Wow.”

There were all kinds of people in this world. I couldn’t believe they even put on shows to try to poach adventurers from other cities. But it honestly made sense, since in this world people relied on monster drops in dungeons for all of its production. And as a result, monster-hunting adventurers were the producers of any city’s primary industry. The quality and quantity of adventurers influenced a city’s

tax earnings.

“It’s kinda like an investment incentive, huh?” I mused.

“What’s that?”

“Sorry, ignore that. By the way...Emily, you’re acting like everything you’re saying is hearsay.”

Emily looked bothered and she replied, “Celeste told me about it.”

“Celeste? I know she’s been gathering a lot of info, but why would you need to learn that from her?”

I mean, Emily’s been living here all her life, right?

“I lived in dungeons. Plus, festivals cost money.”

“...”

So that’s it.

Until I’d rented that 20,000-piro apartment and dragged her into it, Emily was a poor adventurer with E-rank drops. She’d lived like a survivalist in dungeons.

“Okay. How about we go to the festival?” I proposed.

“Together?”

“Yeah! They’ll have cool stuff there, right? Let’s have fun together.”

“...Okay!”



We left our home and walked through the city together. It was still morning, but the place was already bustling with activity. People wore unusual clothes, and items from places other than Cyclo were all over the place. I spotted traveling merchants like the ones who had gathered around Selenium, but they were much greater in number and had far more diverse selections of goods.

“There’s so much stuff. It’s amazing...” Emily mumbled.

“Tell me if there’s anything you want, okay?”

“Huh? But...” she trailed off and looked around the shops with a guilty look. “It’s a festival, so it’s all expensive.”

“Quit worrying about money. *It’s a festival*, so let’s splurge.”

“But...”

“If you don’t choose anything, I’ll just pick something for you. Like this familiar plushie, for example.”

“Please stop, I beg you, anything but that, please, please, I’ll do anything!” she protested at an incredible speed.

The plush, which resembled a certain black life-form, was pretty cute to me. But of course, Emily couldn’t deal with it. No surprise there, since she couldn’t handle those speedy, scuttling cockroaches.

“Then let’s buy something else.”

“O-Okay!”

Now enthusiastic, Emily started rummaging through various products at various storefronts. Eventually, she stopped in front of a certain shop.

“What’s the matter, Emily? Pickup boxes...?”

I stood next to her and looked at the wares. They were all pickup boxes, items that sucked in drops when you defeated monsters. I knew them well, since I always used them to collect special bullets.

“What is this?” she asked.

“Thank you for asking, Miss! This is experience from Alkyl!” the shopkeeper, a young man with a jovial smile and eyes as slim as thread, answered.

“Experience? What’s that mean?” I asked.

“The monster that dropped this is called a Mecha Mouse. Have you heard of Mecha Mice? They are wonderful monsters that give you ten times the experience points of other monsters of their strength!”

“Wow.”

“Leave this in a place with no people, back off, and wait three minutes.”

“Aha!” I exclaimed, having caught on. “And you turn it into an outsider?”

“Indeed! Defeat the Mecha Mouse when it appears...and you will obtain ten times the usual experience points!”

“Interesting.”

I’d never thought of that. Levels and experience points existed even in a world where drops were prized, but most adventurers didn’t pay much attention to them. Instead, they just kept on farming dungeons, endlessly defeating monsters until they found that their level had reached its maximum.

“So outsiders don’t drop anything, but you still get the experience points from killing them?” I wondered aloud.

“Yoda, don’t you remember when I leveled up from them?”

“Huh? Oh, right! The femini!”

Emily nodded.

That had happened not too long after we’d met—around the time I first obtained freeze rounds. Cargo had tumbled down a cliff, falling into a spot that was too far to reach. When Emily defeated all of the resulting outsiders in one blow, she’d leveled up.

So there you have it: you can level up even from killing outsiders.

“Wow, so you sell EXP... By the way, what’s inside it?” I asked.

“Sir, wait—”

The shopkeeper tried to stop me as I took a box and opened it. Just then—

“Whoa!”

“Eep!”

“E-Eww, that stinks!”

I rushed to close the lid and put down the box. The moment I

opened it, I inhaled a foul stench. It smelled like someone had taken rotten meat and fish, thrown it into a sewer to ferment, and then made it into concentrate. That was just how intense it was.

“Urk... My eyes sting...” Emily groaned.

“Th-This is...”

The shopkeeper politely explained, “That is the poison mushroom, Mecha Mouse’s drop. The item itself is worthless, so it’s put in pickup boxes and sold as experience points.”

“M-Makes sense. Sorry for opening it.”

The stench spread, causing people enjoying the festival to all glare at me. Unable to take it, I bought a box to apologize and scrambled with Emily.



Outside of Cyclo, in an empty field, we put the poison mushroom box down and walked away. Buying it was one thing, but now we had to deal with it, so we interrupted our tour of the festival and decided to turn it into an outsider□in other words, EXP.

While we waited, we read over the pamphlet the shopkeeper had given us.

“Is that a pamphlet about Alkyl?” Emily asked me.

“Yeah... It says Alkyl’s a perfect place for sightseeing.”

“Sightseeing?”

“Two out of three of their monsters drop stinky things like that mushroom, while the remaining ones don’t drop anything at all. So, despite having four dungeons, their city is having a rough time with taxes.”

“I had no idea.”

“Their drops may be rotten, but their monsters give a lot of EXP,

so they've geared their city toward sightseeing and supporting adventurers to get them to spend money there. Look, it even says they've got an outsider arena for people who can't stand stinky drops."

"I'm impressed that they've found such a niche," Emily mused.

"Interesting. You and Celeste aren't at max level yet, right? Let's go there some time."

"Okay! We can all go together!" Emily agreed with a big smile, having remembered my promise to let everyone learn magic once they maxed their levels.

Just then, the box began to swell. It was turning into an outsider.

"Yoda!"

"Yeah!"

We nodded to each other. I loaded my support bullets, restraining rounds and recovery rounds, and stood by. Emily hoisted her hammer and readied herself to leap at any time.

The thing that had emerged from the poison shroom was a two-foot-tall giant rat. Its body was a metallic silver color, but the silver peeled and flaked in places, revealing darker colors underneath. It was kind of like how zombie flesh rotted and fell off.

Like a metallic zombie, the Mecha Mouse made me think.

To be frank, it was gross. And the way it scampered around a bit, stopped, scampered, and stopped again was very much like a rat.

"Can you handle that, Emily?"

"Hm? Of course, why wouldn't I be able to?"

"Er... Nothing, as long as you're fine."

I'd figured a girl who hated C-words would hate rats, but it seemed Emily was fine.

"I'll take care of this!"

"All right."

As soon as I fired a restraining round, Emily attacked. Ropes of

light ensnared the Mecha Mouse, so Emily's hammer struck true.

Screeech!

"I-It's hard," Emily said.

"Want some help?"

"...I'm fine!"

Emily took a deep breath and readied her hammer again. She stored up power. I could almost hear her hands tightening around her weapon. I planted my feet, ready for whatever incredible thing might happen.

"Haaaaaah!"

Suddenly remembering my magic, I called out, "Reservation!"

Reservation: a spell that could be cast on a single monster, applying my own drop rates no matter who defeated it.

After I cast it, the hammer slammed into the monster.

Bwoom!

The ground shook so hard that even I, who was standing at a distance, felt like I'd fall over. A ten-foot-wide crater had formed at the point of impact.

"I did it, Yoda!" Emily yelled, ecstatic.

"How's your level?"

"It went up!"

"Yeah?"

She'd leveled up from just one of them? It was getting clearer and clearer that we'd all benefit from a trip to Alkyl.

"Yoda, look at this!"

"Hm? Oh, is it a new bullet?"

Emily called me over, so I approached and spotted a bullet unlike any I'd seen before resting inside the crater.

66. Our First Joint Job

I picked up the bullet and stared at it.

“What do you think?” Emily inquired.

“I’ll have to test it out. I think it’s another special bullet.”

“Let’s try aiming it at that rock over there,” she said as she raised her hand and pointed off in another direction. There was a rock about the size of a shed.

“Yeah, good idea. Get behind me just in case, though.”

“Okay.”

While Emily moved, I loaded the new bullet I’d obtained. Then, I turned toward the huge rock and pulled the trigger.

Click.

“What?”

“Something wrong?”

“Nothing’s happening.”

Click. Click.

I pulled the trigger a few more times, but the bullet did not fire.

“Did it misfire? Or is the gun broken?” Emily asked, worried.

“Let’s see.”

I left the new bullet in, loaded a normal bullet elsewhere in the cylinder, and fired again.

Bang!

Part of the rock flew off.

“It seems it isn’t broken.”

I fell silent for a moment.

“Yoda?”

“Is it just me...or was that pretty strong?”

“Oh?”

“That bullet was stronger than usual, wasn’t it?”

“Was it? Oh, do you think...?”

“Yeah.”

I nodded to her. It seemed Emily was thinking what I was thinking.

I took out the new bullet, loaded only a normal one, and fired at the big rock again.

“It’s weaker now,” she noted.

“Let’s go buy more experience points, Emily.”

“Okay!”



We rushed back to Cyclo and bought nine more boxes of poison mushrooms. Then, we took them back to the field and turned them into outsiders. Emily defeated each one after I’d used Reservation on them.

Her level went up two more times, reaching 28. In the process, we received nine more bullets, bringing me to ten.

“This time, I’ll load two.”

“Okay!”

The gun now contained two of this new bullet. I pulled the trigger; as expected, nothing came out.

I loaded a normal bullet...and fired! It gouged out a portion of the rock.

“Incredible! It’s clear even to me now.”

“Yeah, they’re *definitely* stronger. Let’s try three this time.”

After loading a third, I fired another normal bullet. It was even stronger, and the repeated shots turned the giant rock into rubble.

“No denying it now.”

“Yep! So you can’t fire them, but each additional one makes the other bullets in your gun stronger.”

“Since it powers up other attacks, I guess we can call this a buffing round?”

“If you had one normal bullet and put buffing rounds in all the other chambers, I bet the resulting attack would be super strong.”

“So they just power up the others, and their effect doesn’t consume them. Putting too many buffing rounds in would lead to me having to reload more often, since my chambers are limited, but I think I can find some uses for this.”

I thought of all the possible uses of these new bullets. But then, I noticed Emily smiling up at me.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I’m just happy.”

“Happy?”

“I’m happy that you’ve gotten even stronger, Yoda!”

Emily was overjoyed, almost as if my triumph were hers.



After we checked out what the buffing rounds could do, Emily and I returned to Cyclo. We’d dealt with the experience points, Mecha Mice, and buffing rounds, so we resumed our tour of the Harvest Festival.

Now that it was after noon, the city was much livelier—so lively, in fact, that just walking around led to bumping into people. The whole city was getting into the festival mood.

“Something’s going on over there.”

“Think someone’s fightin’.”

“Idiots. If you’ve got energy to spare, use it on dungeons, or something.”

Emily and I looked all over the area, which was seeped in the unique fervor and novelty that only a festival could provide.

By the way, everything Emily saw excited her. Since she'd said this was her first Harvest Festival, I found any reason I could to spend money on her. She had now stopped in front of a street stall that was selling accessories with all kinds of threads or small chains attached. They were all cute, and just the perfect size, too. Some of them would have made good smartphone straps, even.

Emily's eyes shone with excitement as she gazed upon one. I followed her eyes and realized that she was gazing at a bell-like accessory.

"Do you want that?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, no. I just thought it looked nice."

"Yeah?" I said as I turned to the shopkeeper. "Say, can we buy one of those?"

"That will be 3,000 piros, sir."

I whipped out my wallet, paid, and received the bell accessory, which went straight to Emily.

"Here."

"...Thank you."

Emily accepted it and cradled it in both hands with a big smile on her face. Then, she attached it to the handle end of her hammer.

"Is it meant to go there?" I asked.

"Yes."

After tying it securely, she lifted up her hammer, which made a pretty chime.

“Now I can always have it with me.”

“Nice. Maybe someday, monsters will hear that bell and run for the hills. ‘It’s the reaper! The reaper’s bell is ringing!’ they’ll scream, paralyzed with fear.”

“Am I evil now?!”

We joked and continued our romp around the festival.

I heard the jingling of Emily’s bell here and there. And eventually, it became a signal of her very presence, providing me with the same sense of relaxation as the warm homes she made. However, this peace would not last.

A sudden boom and cries from afar rang out. Shortly thereafter, people came running from that direction.

“Yoda!”

“Yeah!”

We nodded to each other and ran, the bell jingling all the while. When we arrived, we faced a monster. Pointed ears, green skin, hips bent forward in a gross stance—it was the very picture of a goblin, but this one was *huge*. Even though it was bending forward, it was still just under ten feet tall.

Appearance of a goblin, size of a giant; such was the monster before us.

Civilians scattered in all directions to escape it.

“What is that?!” I shouted.

“I-I don’t know!” Emily replied.

“If only Celeste were here... Forget it. Let’s do this!”

“Okay!”

“Wait!” a man shrieked at me just as I began to charge. I turned around; he was a young man with blood flowing from his head. He held his wound and said to me, “That’s an increasing goblin. If you don’t kill it in one hit, it’ll get stronger and stronger for every attack it

takes.”

“So that’s how it works? Sounds like it’d be a pain to farm them in dungeons,” I mumbled. After all, you had to be able to fell them in one attack.

“It was put in a cage for the Harvest Festival, but a child threw rocks at it and made it stronger. Normal adventurers can’t handle it now; you two should run, too!”

“But...”

“It’s okay. I’ve called in reinforcements and there they are!”

The man looked behind me, seeming as though he’d seen his salvation. I turned in that direction to find three familiar faces.

“Neptune! And those two...”

“They’re Ran and Lil,” Emily added.

The man with a creepy interest in me, accompanied by his usual two ladies, stood before the increasing goblin.

“Lil, Ran,” Neptune said. “Think you can handle this?”

“Just who do you think I am?” Lil replied.

“I’ll do my best for you, Nee!” Ran chimed in.

They looked at each other, and Neptune stepped forth. Lil and Ran stood at his sides and created magic circles. One gleamed bright, while the other flickered dark.

With song-like incantations, they cast their magic on Neptune.

“Godly Breath!”

“Devilish Curse!”

The two spells, white and black, covered him. With that, two contrasting lights enveloped him and created wings at his back—one black, one white.

Shudder.

I felt raw pressure. Neptune was already strong, but his new strength was palpable.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. It was Emily. She clenched my sleeve, a worried expression on her face.

“Here I come! Haaah!” Neptune roared as he charged at the monster. It was a very ordinary charge, not even very fast. Then, he attacked. However, just before doing so, he flapped his wings and took flight. He then thrust his hand down toward the increasing goblin as if trying to crush it. I could see the goblin’s form being crushed, too. His hand didn’t touch it, but some great invisible force seemed to be crushing the thing.

Splat!

After that sound, the goblin’s spine bent at an impossible angle and it fell back.

Neptune landed and lost his wings.

“Phew.”

Upon hearing that breath, people all around us cheered. They lauded Neptune for defeating the monster that threatened the city. Among them, one little girl ran to Neptune and looked up at him in admiration.

It was a lovely sight□that of the mood of the crowd, tense from battle, relaxing all at once.

I hadn’t gotten a chance to fight, but things had ended, so I turned to leave.

“Hey, is that Sato over there?” Neptune called out. He then said to the little girl, “Sorry, honey. I’ve got a friend over there who’s waiting for me.”

Crap! He saw me. I thought I’d be able to get away before he did...but fine, I’ll just have to get through this□

“Watch out!” my voice came out before I could even think. The goblin that Neptune had just defeated managed to stand up and attack him.

Neptune reacted at once. He blocked the goblin's massive arm, but he was launched away by the force of it.

"Nep!"

"Nee!"

Ran and Lil rushed to his aid, but things were taking an awful turn. Since he had been launched away, only the little girl remained in place. She could not escape; she just stood there, quivering.

The increasing goblin, made even stronger by Neptune's powerful-yet-not-fatal blow, attacked her.

My body reacted before I could even think.

Bang! Bang!

I whipped out my two guns and fired at once. I had fired two normal rounds—but I had ten buffing rounds loaded altogether. The bullets fused midair, creating a round that pierced straight through the goblin.

Actually, *pierced* was too gentle a word. The thirteen-foot-tall giant's whole chest had been gouged out! The bullet flew on, taking out a chunk of a building's roof as well.

"Y-Yoda..." Emily stammered.

"Whoa... I didn't think it would be that strong."

I shuddered at my own destructive might. Two normal rounds, both powered up by five buffing rounds each, had fused into a piercing round—and it had proven far stronger than I'd anticipated.

"Woooooooooooh!"

Cheers erupted all around us. I whipped around in confusion, but there, I saw city folk extolling me for my success.

67. Gratitude and Promises

While people cheered and others returned to the festival mood, I ran to Neptune, who had been launched away by the goblin. He was already standing. Though he was smudged with what looked to be dirt here and there, he didn't seem to be hurt. Lil and Ran brushed the grime off of him. Neptune let it happen, as if that was a normal occurrence.

"You seem unhurt," I commented.

"Yes, I'm fine. Sorry for the trouble, friend. I hate to make you take responsibility for my own mistake."

"I just reacted because a kid was in danger. Don't worry about me."

"At least let me show you my gratitude. Thank you," Neptune replied with a gentle smile.

His attack was strong, make no mistake; it just wasn't strong enough to fell that increasing goblin on its own. It might've been equal to, or even more powerful than, my S-rank strength in hand-to-hand combat, however, so without my guns, I might not have been able to do the job.

"I had a feeling you were a capable man," Neptune praised me. "Honestly, you've exceeded my expectations."

"That so?"

"Your attack was marvelous. Well done, friend. By the way..." he trailed off as he looked behind me.

So did I; he was looking at Emily.

"I hear you have a family now."

"Yeah. I do."

"I see... That is a shame. I like you, but now I can't carelessly try

to recruit you.”

“I wouldn’t join you even if you did it carefully,” I rebutted.

“Shame. Still, I’m not giving up.”

Neptune smiled, which fit his handsome features well, before taking Lil and Ran’s hands and walking off. After he left, Emily—who had watched in silence the whole time—finally spoke up.

“Good job, Yoda.”

“I’m exhausted...” I sighed. He was more tiring than fighting monsters.

“What did that monster drop?” Emily asked me.

“Oh, right. It’s...”

I retrieved my pouch. I would be taking down outsiders as part of the Harvest Festival’s exhibition, so I kept the pouch with me in order to keep people from seeing my drops.

I opened the pouch and showed Emily what was inside.

“It’s...full of normal bullets,” she said, confused.

“Yep. That increasing goblin started off weak, so that tracks. I’d guess all of Cyclo’s normal monsters drop normal bullets when they become outsiders. That’s how it was in Tellurium, anyway.”

“I see! That is disappointing, though. I expected a new item.”

“Well, I’m sure we’ll find plenty more over time.”

I smiled at Emily, took the normal bullets from my pouch, and deposited them with the rest.

“Excuse me...” someone addressed me from the side.

Who is it this time?

I turned and found a little girl. It was the little girl who’d gotten into danger by running to Neptune. I squatted down to her height and asked, “Are you okay? Did you get hurt at all?”

“I’m fine! Thank you, Mister!”

“Yeah? Well, I’m glad you’re okay. Be more careful from now on.

Monsters disappear if they're defeated, so don't get close before they do that, okay?"

As I warned her, I realized just how much I'd gotten used to this world. A world where monsters that disappeared when defeated dropped all sorts of things... If I was explaining these everyday occurrences to a child, perhaps I was taking to this world quite well.

"Yeah! Got it! Hey, um, Mister?" she asked, looking up at me again.

"Yes?"

"When I grow up, I wanna be Amelia the Adventurer!"

"Is your name Amelia?" I asked her.

"Yep! So when I grow up, can you take me into dungeons with you?"

"Sure, I can do that," I replied. That was an adorable request.

"You mean it? Thank you, Mister!" Amelia rejoiced, as innocent as could be.

In ten years, she might be able to go into dungeons herself. That sounded fun. I could imagine us adventuring together, with me being a lazy old dude and her having grown into a responsible young woman who'd keep me straight.

Yeah, that doesn't sound bad at all.

While I imagined that...

Mwah!

I felt something soft on my cheek. Amelia had leaned forward and kissed it.

"Promise?" she urged.

It surprised me a little, but she was just a kid, so it really shouldn't have.

"Yeah, I promise."

I smiled and rustled her hair. In the distance, a woman who

looked to be her mother called out to her. Amelia reluctantly ran over.

Once she'd run off, Emily piped up, "Sounds like we'll have another member of the group!"

"Yeah."

Emily and I watched Amelia off with a smile. We even waved.

Up ahead, we happened to spot Celeste and Eve. Celeste's hands were empty, but Eve cradled a whole ton of carrots. It was hard to even see Eve herself; she looked like a mountain of carrots with legs.

As for Celeste, for some reason, she was so wide-eyed that I thought the corners of her eyes might bleed. What was wrong with her?

"Muh..." she stammered.

"Muh?"

"Are you getting...m-m-married, Ryota?!"

"Whaaat?!"

"You were talking about when she grows up, and promises, and..."

"Oh, that was just□"

"Urk... I can't believe someone's got a leg up on me..."

"Huh?"

Is it just me, or is she making zero sense? Who's got a leg up? Wouldn't Celeste have an advantage, since she's already in the family?

And yet, our sorceress looked down, like the whole world was collapsing before her very eyes.

The mountain of carrots tried to console her by saying, "It's okay. You can have the bad parts of my carrots."

"Your half-baked kindness just makes me feel worse!"

A screw came loose in Celeste's head, and she ran off. The Doppler effect had an amusing effect on her screams as she got further and further away from us.

Celeste returned, now back to normal. As usual, I was taken aback by her beautiful hair, model-like figure, and prim nature.

“Sorry for making you wait,” she apologized. “We ran into an abnormal spawn of sleep slimes, so that took up some time.”

“Abnormal spawn?” I repeated. That was an unfamiliar term.

“Very rarely, a certain monster will start spawning in great numbers in a dungeon. You didn’t know that?”

“I’m not surprised,” Emily chimed in. “You wouldn’t notice abnormal spawns unless there are very few people in the dungeon, like during festivals.”

I had to agree with Emily. On a normal day, dungeons were chock-full of adventurers. I didn’t know how abnormal these abnormal spawns were, but just having more monsters wouldn’t mean much; the experienced adventurers of this world would kill them in seconds.

“And that’s how you got all of those?” I asked.

“I witnessed bunny heaven,” Eve said, still buried in her mountain of carrots. She looked more carrot than Eve right now.

“You have so many!” Emily giggled.

“Carrot luxury.”

“Wowww! Now I *reeeally* want to cook something,” Emily suddenly spoke up, her tone stilted.

“Emily?”

“I reeeally want to cook carrots.”

“Carrots! Want!”

Eve, on the other hand, was business as usual.

“I’ll make it riiight away. Maybe bell peppers stuffed with carrots...”

“Whooooooh! Hah, I-I have a suggestion! Carrots stuffed with carrots!”

“That would just be a big carrot,” I interrupted.

“What would it look like, I wonder?” Celeste laughed. We grinned at each other, amused.

“Suuure,” Emily said. “We’d better go home, then...”

“Okay!” Eve readily agreed.

“Celeste and Yoda are here, too. Since we’re cooking carrots, nooobody is allowed home except for Eve. Okaaay?”

“Hey, what the heck?” I chuckled.

“...Ah!” Celeste gasped from some realization. Emily winked at her and left with Eve.

“Wonder what that was about.”

“Geez, Emily... You don’t have to go that far!”

“It’ll be fine. She’s skilled enough to make anything work. Hell, we might go, ‘Whooooooh!’ over carrot-stuffed carrots like Eve did, too. You know how good a chef Emily is.”

“I know, but... I know, but that’s not it...”

Now I was *really* confused. For some reason, Celeste was fidgeting. What was her deal? Was she that worried about the carrot-stuffed carrots?

I’d better dispel her doubts.

“It’s okay. I have faith in Emily,” I declared.

Celeste looked at me in amazement. Then, she was downcast.

“Lucky her,” she grumbled.

“Hm?”

“Emily’s lucky that you have so much faith in her. I wish...”

“What are you talking about? I have faith in you, too, Celeste.”

“...Huh?” Celeste mumbled. She was swinging between shock and depression like a pendulum. “You...have faith in me?”

“Yeah. Like...the increasing goblin. You know about those, right?”

“Y-Yes? They’re from B8 of Boron,” Celeste said as she returned to her usual demeanor and told me all about the monster I’d defeated a while ago. “Though they’re weak, they can be difficult to deal with. If you don’t defeat them in one blow, they recover their HP and grow stronger. They’re considered harmless to adventurers, but since they grow, they have various uses after being made into outsiders. Incidentally, they drop bell peppers, so they aren’t good for making money.”

All I had to do was say its name and she was able to provide me with far more information than I already had when earlier, Emily had replied that she knew nothing about it.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” I declared.

“Huh? What, about the increasing goblin?”

“No, I mean you.”

“Bwuh?”

“Your wide-area magic and destructive capabilities stand out among our family, of course, but your knowledge is something else. Feel free to chime in if I’m mistaken, but it seems to me like you already know every single monster in every dungeon of Cyclo.”

“R-Right. I’ve been in this city long enough, so I took the time to memorize them,” Celeste replied. Her facial expression seemed to ask, *Is something wrong with that?*

I don’t think she understands just how incredible a feat that is.

That made me like her a whole lot more.

“That’s huge!” I insisted. “I can’t imagine life without you anymore.”

“Th-Then you mean...you need me?” she asked, a shy expression on her face.

“Of course. I hope we’ll be friends forever.”

“Ryota...” Celeste gazed at me for a while before giggling. “Don’t you know how mean that sounds?”

“M-Mean?! How?”

“The part where we’re ‘friends’ forever.”

How is that a bad thing?

“Heehee... But okay. I won’t worry about it for now. Though, that doesn’t mean I’m giving up.”

“Y-Yeah. Never give up, right?”

“And I’ll keep on doing my best!”

My gaze was stolen by the smile on Celeste’s face.

“...Y-Yeah. Do that.”

That was all I could muster.

Our conversation ended there, and we looked around the festival before heading home.

Side note: when we tried the carrot-stuffed carrots...

“Whoooooooooh!”

...Celeste and I roared, hearts in our eyes.



The next day, Celeste and I faced a high-guts slime in the Harvest Festival arena at the southernmost tip of Cyclo. We were surrounded by a sea of spectators.

Celeste spread out her magic circle and chanted. After that, she thrust her hand forth and unleashed Inferno. Fire devoured the high-guts slime, but then she squeezed her outstretched hand into a tight fist. This caused the fire to fade in an instant, leaving the slime mere inches from death.

I fired a normal bullet to finish it off. The crowd cheered, full of

adventurers, common citizens, and sightseers alike.

“That lady’s something else! Those high-guts slimes reflect excessive damage, but she’s not even wounded.”

“She’s able to use strong moves, and can also calibrate them to such a precise degree... Only someone who knows the monster inside and out could manage that.”

“Celeste of the Ryota family... How is such a high-level mage a complete unknown?”

“Is that guy their leader? He had total faith in her abilities.”

“I’m gonna have to look into them!”

The same woman who’d once struggled to defeat a pile of trash now turned to me, with cheers and compliments at her back, and smiled.

My heart began to beat faster upon taking in the sight.

69. The Girl Who Was Level 1

Today marked the final day of the Harvest Festival. I split away from my friends, wandered around the city, and realized Cyclo was still bustling with activity.

While I looked around, a certain place drew my eye. It was a huge, tennis court-sized tent. I could hear screaming and what sounded like fighting within. However, the employee out front didn't budge an inch at the noise. In fact, they were trying to draw more people in.

"Monster house...? What is this, I wonder?"

"It's an attraction for children," someone answered my mumblings.

"Erza?"

The one who had spoken to me was Erza. She wore the familiar Swallow's Returned Favor uniform and was looking up at me with a sweet smile on her face.

"Are you curious about the monster house?" she asked.

"Yeah. What's it like?"

"Put simply, they gather monsters that can't hurt humans and turn them into an attraction. Kids love it because they look up to adventurers."

"Wow... So there are monsters that can't hurt people? That means you can just farm them all you want, right?"

"Yes. That's why their drops are cheap," she noted.

"I see."

So it was like a haunted house, then? In manga, there were some characters who could summon ghosts and the like who used their powers to make realistic, yet safe haunted houses. This kind of

reminded me of that.

This one had an entrance and an exit. An elementary school-aged boy waddled out of the exit, begging his mother to let him go again because he had so much fun.

Now that I understood the monster house, I walked away from it. Erza followed next to me.

“Judging by your outfit, I assume you’re working?” I asked her.

“Yes, but don’t worry. Like yesterday and the day before, adventurers almost never come to the shop. They’re all out enjoying the festival.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Would you like to stop by?” Erza offered. “I could bring you some nice tea and sweets.”

“Are you sure that’s okay? I don’t have anything to sell.”

“Of course it’s fine. You’re our favorite customer, after all,” she replied with a smile.

Maybe I should stop by, then.

“I wonder if that one girl is still around...” Erza said on our way to Swallow’s Returned Favor.

“Er, who?”

“She’s been here since the day before yesterday. They say she ran away from her village to become an adventurer, and she’s looking for anyone who’s willing to let her into their party.”

“A wannabe adventurer, huh?”

“Right. But everyone’s turned her down.”

“Why?” I inquired.

“They’ve judged her as talentless. Her current level is 1, while her max level is 2. Her stats are low as well, so nobody sees any merit in letting her join their party.”

“That’s sad.”

“Typically, people like her choose something other than adventuring, so I think there’s a reason she’s being so stubborn about it. I just hope she’s found a party...”

We reached Swallow’s Returned Favor while we chatted. Erza’s frown turned upside down into her usual service smile as she opened the door.

“Right this way, sir.”

“Thank you.”

As she’d mentioned before, the place was almost empty. It was usually full to bursting, but I only saw about three groups of adventurers.

“Wait right here. I’ll make some tea for□” Erza began to speak, but she was interrupted.

“You’ll really let me in?!” a girl shouted, sounding excited.

I looked toward the source of the voice and saw a lively young girl with a ponytail and sparkling eyes. The person she was talking to was on the other side of a counter, so I couldn’t make out their figure.

“Is she the one?” I asked.

“Yes. I’m glad her problems are solved.”

“Yeah, I’m glad everything worked out.”

Someone spoke to the girl.

“Yep, I think you’ve got character. Character that will truly shine in a dungeon!”

“Hm? That voice...” I muttered.

“Something wrong, Ryota?” Erza asked, appearing curious as I walked over toward the girl.

When I drew closer to her, I saw the person hidden behind the counter: a well-built older man who was energetic with powerful facial features. I knew this man well, since he was the one I’d seen in dungeons harping on about “dreams” and “hope” to his subordinates.

He'd brainwashed those two into working until they dropped. I saw them in the girl. Her bleak future flashed before my eyes.

"Off we go! To make our dreams come true□"

Reflex spurred me to step between them and say, "Hold on a sec."

I glared at the man. He frowned back.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I want this girl to join my party."

"What?!"

The girl looked back and forth between us and panicked.

"Me?! H-H-Huuuh?! Nobody's ever wanted me, so why am I so popular now?!"

I ignored her for the moment and locked eyes with the man.

"Rather rude to interrupt and glare at me like that, no?" he scowled.

"You can't have her."

"Do you know each other? Either way..."

"*You* cannot have her."

"...Hmph!"

Swallow's Returned Favor, already quiet due to the lack of people, turned silent. The few adventurers, employees, and the girl herself all watched with bated breath.

The older man glared at me. Strong malice was evident in his eyes. I could almost hear him say, *How dare you get in my way, whippersnapper?*

The look in his eyes only confirmed that I could not let her leave with him. I didn't have the power to undo brainwashing, but I could at least stop it before it began. I reached for the gun on my hip. If it came down to it, I could use force to□

"Oh? Is Ryota going to let you join him?" Erza's voice, sunny despite the tense atmosphere, cut in. She half-ignored us glaring at

each other and spoke to the girl. “Congratulations! The Ryota family is the center of attention lately. You’re lucky to get a direct invitation from the man himself!”

“L-Lucky? Me?” the girl stammered.

“Yep! I mean, it’s the Ryota family!”

“Erza’s right,” Ina, her coworker, chimed in. “They’re popular because it’s an exclusive, elite family. They even got a direct request from the dungeon chief just a while back.”

They sure are putting me on a pedestal.

“A-Are they really that incredible?”

“Yep!”

“Incredible is the only word fit to describe this man.”

I could understand if two people I knew complimented me, but it didn’t stop there. The few adventurers there started talking about the rumors they’d heard about me.

“So that’s the legendary Ryota Sato?”

“I hear he saved Neptune just the other day.”

“For real? You mean THE Neptune, from the Neptune family?”

Thanks to them, the girl began looking at me with respect and admiration.

“...Tch.”

The old man clicked his tongue and glared at me before stomping away. It seemed he’d decided a girl who admired me was no longer fit for brainwashing. After all, she wasn’t looking at him anymore; she gazed at me with stars in her eyes after hearing everyone hype me up.

I watched as the man left the store and sighed in relief. I was glad that I’d kept someone from being snatched up by an evil employer.

70. A Girl Born in a Dungeon

I led the girl out of Swallow's Returned Favor.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Alice."

"Okay. Hi, I'm Ryota Sato. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too!"

"First off, I'd better introduce you to my friends. And...persuade them, I guess."

I'd only recruited her to save her from a corrupt employer. How could I convince my allies to take her in? I couldn't imagine them being against it, so perhaps it was best to just go home and tell them straight.

Eve appeared.

"Two low-levels," she said curtly.

"Huh?"

The girl, clad in her bunny suit and bunny ears, stared at us with her usual ennui-filled eyes...that were mostly focused on Alice.

"I hate low-levels□"

"Don't you dare!" I roared as I stepped between them and took the chop in Alice's place.

A loud slapping sound echoed out around us. It stung.

"Stay out of my way, low-level."

"How about you stop chopping random people?!"

"But I hate low levels."

Sure, Alice had a low level□max level of 2 and current level of 1□but that didn't matter right now.

"Bad! If you chop her, you're going a whole year without carrots."

Eve was left speechless. She fell to her hands and knees in an

“orz” shape, and her rabbit ears flopped down as if she was dead. The threat had worked so well that I started to feel bad.

“Hey, er, don’t feel so down,” I said, trying to console her. “Now I feel bad. Umm, as long as you don’t chop her, you won’t have to worry about your carrot supply.”

“You mean it?” she asked.

“Yeah. Just don’t chop her, got it?”

“I will hold back...for the carrots!” Eve stood right back up.

“Good...I guess.”

She threw a super high-speed chop at me. I didn’t mind her doing it to me, though.

“So, anyway, I’d like to let this girl into our party.”

Eve looked to Alice and asked, “Do you like carrots?”

“Sorry. I’m not a fan.”

“Good.”

“How is that good?!” I protested.

“She won’t try to take them from me,” Eve replied matter-of-factly.

“Oh, okay, so that’s your point. Well, glad you’re fine with it. But wait, what will the others think?”

“I’ll persuade them.”

“Come again?”

“Give the bunny carrots and she will persuade them for you,” Eve stated as she gazed at me. Her eyes sparkled in anticipation. It almost...looked like she was begging for carrots.

I didn’t think Emily or Celeste would oppose my decision, and I doubted we’d be any better off if Eve tried to persuade them, but I just couldn’t win against those eyes.

“All right,” I surrendered. “If you persuade them, you can eat all the carrots you want for a day.”

“Leave it to me! No matter what it takes, even if I have to go to the ends of the earth or heaven or hell, I shall persuade them, I swear!”

“You’re more talkative and poetic than usual!”

Eve ran off, letting out a glorious battle cry all the while. She was always so motivated when carrots were involved. I was a little scared, but I decided to trust her.

Eve’s persuasion aside, I knew I’d still have to talk to them later. For now, though, I would let that carrot-crazy rabbit take care of things.

Once Eve was gone, I faced Alice again and asked, “So, uh, wanna go to a dungeon?”

“You mean it?!”

“You’re acting a lot like Eve around carrots. Do you like dungeons that much?”

“Yeah! I was born in a dungeon!”

“You...were?”

“My mom said she just popped me out while she was working in a dungeon, so I’ve always wanted to go to one!”

“She...popped you out while she was in a dungeon? Man, she sounds like one of those people who carries their baby while they farm.”

Hell, that may be true figuratively and literally.

Cyclo was an agricultural city, so dungeons only dropped plants, making it sort of like a farm.



I arrived at Nihonium.

I’d chosen this place because I didn’t want anyone getting in the

way. As this dungeon had been designated dropless, only people who farmed air like Princess Margaret ever came here. Most of the time, it was empty.

We stopped in front of the status board at the entrance.

“Try touching this.”

“Okay!”

Alice did as I told and operated the status board, showing her stats.

“So these are your current stats, huh?”

“Looks like it! This is my second time seeing them.”

“Wait, really?”

“Yep! We didn’t have one of these at the village, and it’s my first time using one in Cyclo.”

I took a good look at Alice’s stats. To be frank, the only word that described them was “dire.”

Her maximum level was 2, and most of her stats were either E or F. She had *one* E-rank drop, so she wasn’t quite one of those Failures, but it wasn’t in plants. That E-rank meant nothing in Cyclo.

I could see why everyone had refused to let her into their party.

I thought about a few things, such as...what I could do to help her improve. We could level her up once, feed her the magic fruit from an outsider to teach her two spells, and raise her drops with equipment and potions.

That’s about it, right?

If we did that much, she would probably be able to hold her own in dungeons.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, concerned.

“Sorry, I’m just working out some plans. Let’s go in; it’s time to level you up.”

“Okay!”



As usual, B1 of Nihonium was devoid of other people. I'd wondered if Princess Margaret's group was here producing air, but they were not.

"Wowww..." Alice gasped.

"What's up?"

"Awesome... Dungeons are awesome!"

"Awesome?"

"Yeah! It's, like, really calming!"

"Places like this calm you...?"

That was very much not my impression of them. There were different kinds of dungeons out there, but Nihonium was a limestone cavern-like dungeon with stalagmites and stalactites all over the place. I had never considered it calming.

"And the air feels so nostalgic!" she added.

"...Maybe that's because you were born in a dungeon."

"Oooh, yeah!" Alice realized and murmured emotionally, "I'm so glad I got to come to a dungeon..."

"Now, let's go kill a monster."

"We should go this way, then."

Upon hearing me, Alice turned and walked without a moment's hesitation.

"Huh?"

"What? Is this way bad?"

"It's not bad, but...why that way?"

"Because there are lots of monsters this way."

I knew B1 of Nihonium well. After all, I'd been through it so many times that I knew almost every place where monsters spawned. I'd even memorized the timing for them to respawn. It was one of the

places that I could farm at maximum efficiency.

Alice had gone in the direction with the most skeletons on this floor. Of course, you couldn't see or even sense them from here, but she sounded so certain about it.

"Have you been here before?" I probed.

"Nope. Huh? I wonder how I can tell..." Alice replied, now confused by her knowledge.

"You can 'tell'? You didn't learn anything beforehand, then?"

"Right. It's just... I can tell that there are lots this way."

"Is that because you were born in a dungeon...?"

"Maybe!" Alice said with a smile, not puzzled about it one bit.

"...Can you tell where there *aren't* monsters, too?"

"I can. Why?"



I followed Alice's lead for twenty whole minutes. The entire time, we didn't run into a single skeleton. *Not a single one*, after I'd told her to walk in the directions with no monsters.

"Hey, why are we doing this?" Alice asked with a cock of her head. "Don't we wanna fight monsters?"

She still hadn't realized just how incredible this was. It was a ridiculous feat to not encounter any monsters throughout twenty minutes of walking, especially in a dungeon that was crawling with them due to no adventurers culling their numbers.

Even I, someone who knew the place like the back of my hand, couldn't do that. Despite my knowledge of where they would spawn, monsters moved. They wouldn't always be in the same places. If I walked alone, I would have run into them.

"Simply awesome," I mused.

“Huh? What is?”

“It’s terrifying that you don’t even know.”

Alice cocked her head as far as it would go. Question marks formed over her head.



When I returned, Alice screamed, “Whooooa!” over and over.

“Whooooa! What was that?! Doesn’t that hurt? Whooooa!”

I was now surrounded by ten skeletons who attacked me nonstop. It was just like what I’d done before; I used my S-rank HP and vitality to drag them all behind me instead of defeating them.

“Back off a little, Alice,” I warned her.

“Okay!”

Upon seeing that she’d obeyed, I loaded my gun with five buffing rounds and one restraining round. I then fired at my feet. The bullet flashed...and all ten skeletons were restrained by threads of light. After that, I calmly left them behind. It was anyone’s guess how long this would take, but they’d stay restrained for a pretty long time thanks to the five buffing rounds.

Note to self: check how long these last some time.

For now, Alice was my priority.

“Try taking these guys down,” I told her. “I’m not positive, but I think they’ll get you to level 2.”

“Okay! But how? I’ve never fought monsters before...”

“Good question. Wanna try hitting them with that rock?”

“You mean this?” Alice asked as she lifted up a basketball-sized rock on the cavern floor. It was pretty big and appeared heavy. She picked it up with a “Hup,” then smashed it against one of the restrained skeletons. The immobile skeleton’s bones were shattered. “I

did it!”

“Do that same thing with the others now.”

“Okay!”

Alice slaughtered the skeletons. She was a little sluggish due to the weight of the rock, but the restraining round remained in effect throughout the five or so minutes she took to defeat all ten monsters.

“Ah!” she gasped.

“Did you level up?”

“Yep!”

“Then let’s go outside and check.”

“Okay!”

I escorted the eager Alice out of the dungeon, and we checked her stats on the board.

Compared to what I remembered, it looked like her MP had gone up a rank. Nothing else had changed. It felt a little disappointing for hitting her level cap, but at least her MP had risen.

Might as well give her a magic fruit, right? Hell, maybe we should just have her eat tons of fruits and let her eat the one-level penalty? It’d only bring her MP back from D to E, after all. In return, she can learn tons of magic. Yeah, maybe that’s the best bet...

“Well, we’ll think about it,” I said, deciding to shelve the issue for now.

“Hey, hey! Can we go back inside?” Alice asked.

“Why, did you drop something in there?”

“No, but those Boneys told me to come back soon!”

“They...did? You mean the skeletons?” I confirmed.

“Yep!”

“I didn’t hear anything...”

“But they said it!” she insisted.

“Hmm...”

I don't get it, but something's clearly up...

Alice had called dungeons calming. She knew where monsters were, too. If she said she'd heard a voice, then I had to assume that was true.

"Wanna go back, then?"

"Yep!"

After flashing me a beaming smile, she ran into the dungeon. I chased her into B1...where we ran into a skeleton. I fired a restraining round to freeze it in place.

"What's the plan?"

"It's telling me to kill it."

What is it, a masochist? A joke ran through my mind.

Meanwhile, Alice approached the skeleton. This time, she broke off a slender stalactite and smashed it into her prey. It wasn't as strong as the rock, so it took a few strikes for her to bring it down.

I expected the beaten-down skeleton to disappear as usual□but it did not. Instead, its bones gathered in one spot, glowed, and condensed further.

"Wh-What's going on?" I asked.

Once the light faded, something I'd never seen before appeared. It was a small, kind of cute skeleton. The thing was as small as a toy you might win from a gachapon machine. It was chibified, too. On top of all that, it moved, bones clacking all the while. Frankly...it was adorable.

Alice squatted down, let the chibi skeleton stand on her hand, and said in apparent reply to it, "Okay! We'll be best friends!"

"Best friends? You mean...?"

"It says it'll fight with us!"

"Bwuh?!"

The unexpected situation left me at a complete loss for words.

71. A Smile Protected

I may be witnessing history in the making.

On B1 of Tellurium, a slime fought a skeleton. The slime was, of course, this floor's monster. As for the skeleton, it was a *liiittle* different from the ones I knew. It was in a chibified form, yet it had grown larger compared to before, leading to a rather cute appearance. Its clacking, normally a terrifying sound, was now kind of funny.

Said skeleton was locked in combat with a slime.

"Go! You can do it!" Alice cheered the skeleton on from a safe distance.

A Nihonium monster had encroached on Tellurium, to a floor with nothing but slimes. Monsters were supposed to die if they went to different floors or moved dungeons, so it was kind of insane that a skeleton was present here.

The battle between skeleton and slime ended in a narrow victory for the skeleton. Its arm was off and its skull was cracked, so it was in rough shape.

"Wowww! Boney, good job! Oh, you're coming back?"

The skeleton nodded, and with a *pop*, it returned to chibi size. Its arm was back and its skull was in one piece. It had returned to a complete skeleton and gone back to Alice.

Alice lifted it in her palms and rubbed her cheek against it like it was a pet.

"Good job, Boney!"

Rattle, rattle.

The skeleton didn't speak, but it seemed to be responding with silly motions.

I picked up the bean sprouts dropped by the fallen slime and

examined them. Good quantity, good quality; in my experience, this was about a C-rank drop rate's worth.

I put them away and said to Alice, "Can you make that skeleton bigger again?"

"I can! It costs MP, though," Alice explained. She then held her hands flat and thrust them outward. "Go, Boney!"

The chibi skeleton grew once more. It was unwounded, sporting an intact arm.

"So it heals, huh?" I noted.

"Yep! Coming back to me heals Boney."

"Awesome... I mean, wait, how does it do that?"

"I dunno. Oh, but!" Alice piped up.

"But?"

"Boney calls me Big Sister. Do you think that's related?"

"...Because you were both born in dungeons, maybe?" I suggested. It sounded crazy, but that was my best guess.

"Maybe!"

Alice seemed to agree, too, and held the skeleton "Boney" against her cheek again. With or without evidence, I had a feeling that was how it worked.

"Ah!" she gasped.

"What's up now?"

"Bubbly's calling me."

"Bubbly? You mean...a slime?"

"Yeah!" Alice nodded.

I think I'm starting to understand her naming scheme here. Skeletons are Boney, slimes are Bubbly. Now I'm excited to know what names she'll give other monsters.

The three of us—including Boney, I guess—proceeded through the dungeon.

When a young adventurer we passed along the way saw the skeleton, his jaw dropped and he exclaimed, “A monster?! Wait, monsters aren’t that cute. Plus, this is a slime floor.”

Despite his surprise, he came to his own understanding of the situation.

Eventually, we reached the monster. One slime was bouncing straight up and down.

“Is this the one that called you?” I asked.

“Yep! It says to try killing it.”

“Want me to do it?” I asked as I put a hand on my gun.

“I think it has to be me.”

“Oh, okay.”

I’d figured as much, so I backed off and let her handle it. Meanwhile, *she* backed off and let Boney handle it.

“Go, Boney! I’m rooting for you!”

Thanks to Alice’s cheers, Boney attacked this slime with more vigor than the last. Kind of wild that I could understand that a skeleton was excited, but I could. Perhaps it had some charm now that it had been turned cute?

The skeleton and slime fought. It was an intense battle between two weak monsters. The slime’s attack threw the skeleton’s head off—but then, the skeleton kicked its own head.

“Should it be doing that?!” I shouted, bewildered.

Boney’s head flew, spinning through the air, until it collided with the slime and sent half of its jelly-like body flying.

The slime fell...but it did not disappear. Like with the skeleton, the slime’s body emitted light. When it was blinding, it condensed all at once and became small enough to fit in Alice’s palm.

Its appearance was almost unchanged, except for its eyes turning cuter.

“Good job, Boney! And nice to meet you, Bubbly!”

The chibified skeleton rattled on one of Alice’s hands, while the chibified slime bobbed and bounced on her other.

“Got another little brother?” I asked her.

“No, not really.”

“Huh? I thought they called you Big Sister?”

“Boney’s a girl, so Bubbly isn’t ‘another’ brother.”

“That thing’s a girl?!”

The chibi skeleton Boney’s face□skull, rather□turned a little red.

Seriously?



Boney and Bubbly beat the tar out of a slime. Even when they grew, they remained in a chibi-styled form as they fought normal-looking monsters.

“Go! You’ve got this!” Alice exclaimed as she cheered them on. It seemed to have an effect, since they felled the slime in an instant. The slime dropped bean sprouts and disappeared, then Boney and Bubbly returned to palm size and stood on Alice’s hands.

Boney wasn’t bad, but Bubbly was way too adorable. Given its size, it was cute enough to be a cell phone strap or worthy of putting next to your home computer.

After Alice congratulated them on a job well done, they rode on her shoulders, which made them look even cuter.

“Hey, Ryota?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you! I got to meet Boney and Bubbly because of you.”

“I didn’t do much...”

“No, you did a lot! And Boney and Bubbly want to thank you,

too.”

While Alice had a big smile on her face, Boney rattled and Bubbly hopped up and down on her shoulders. I couldn’t understand them, but they seemed to be thanking me.

Suddenly, I noticed a certain group far behind Alice. It was the old man who yelled about “dreams” and “being proud,” along with the young man and woman who were stuck with him. They were even more haggard and depressed than the last time I’d seen them. I knew how that felt; I’d seen it plenty of times back at the company.

The group□stuck working even during a festival□continued on without noticing us and headed down to the next floor.

“Ryota?” Alice said, noticing my silence.

“Sorry, just got lost in thought. I’m happy you got to meet your new friends, Alice.”

“Yeah! Thanks, Ryota!”

I was happy to have saved her from such an evil man.

72. The Day Dungeons Didn't Drop

At night, while the city was still bustling with Harvest Festival activities, I took Alice to our home—our beautiful, new, magic storm-insulated, three-story home.

“I’m back!” I called out and walked in as per usual.

“Coming iiiiin,” Alice bellowed as she followed me inside without an ounce of fear.

We walked up to the second-floor living room, where we found Emily, Celeste, and even Eve.

Eve was sitting at the table, eating something cooked on a skillet. On closer inspection, I realized it was a carrot. She looked ecstatic as she gingerly cut into it and ate one bite at a time.

“Welcome home, Yoda.”

“Hey there, Emily. Did you make that?”

“Yep! Eve brought us good news, so I made carrot steak as thanks.”

“Carrot steak?”

“Yes,” Emily confirmed.

I approached Eve and looked at her skillet. What I’d previously thought was just a carrot resembled Hamburg steak, with finely chopped ingredients worked into it. It was the color, smell, and shape of a carrot, but was also so much more.

“How do you keep doing things like this?” I asked, mystified.

“I wanted to try something new.”

Eve stuffed her face with carrot Hamburg steak and moaned, “This is the reason bunnies are born.”

“Sure seems like it’s a hit,” I chuckled.

“I’m glad!”

Eve turned to Emily and said, "I want to eat your carrots for the rest of my life..."

"She just proposed."

"P-P-P-Please reconsider!" Emily panicked.

I was interested in carrot Hamburg steak, but that could wait. I figured I ought to introduce Alice to everyone first. However, while my eyes were drawn to the carrot, Celeste had approached Alice.

"C-Cute..." she mumbled. Her eyes were almost heart-shaped. She looked enraptured.

"Celeste?" I called out.

"Cute..." she repeated.

Alice, seeing Celeste's obvious interest, introduced them.

"Their names are Boney and Bubbly."

"How adorable... C-Could I rub my cheek against them?"

"Huh? Hmm... What do you two think?" Alice asked the chibified monsters on her shoulders. They couldn't talk; instead, they hid behind her back. "Ah! They're scared."

"N-Nooo..." Celeste groaned, stunned.

Suddenly, I remembered what had happened when we'd moved right after coming back from Selenium: Celeste's luggage had included some fancy plushies that I'd caught sight of. Boney and Bubbly were kind of like plushies right now, right? And the funny way they moved made them look cute even to me, a guy who didn't care for plushies. Their cuteness had Celeste hooked.

Now, that was great and all, but this would get in the way of introductions.

"Alice, can you make them big outside dungeons?" I asked.

"I'll try. Boney, Bubbly!" Alice called out. When she did, the creatures hiding behind her grew big. They were in battle-ready form now. "They can."

“Good. Now□”

I’d thought maybe we could talk at last, but nope.

“Cuuuuuute!” Celeste exclaimed, her eyes turning into even bigger hearts as she closed in on them. “How adorable you two are! Let me rub my cheek against you□no, I know! Come and let me snuggle you to sleep tonight!”

Even in their original size, the monsters remained terrified as they hid behind Alice.

“It’s okay! I just wanna snuggle you to sleep! Just a liiittle snuggling should be fine!”

“That doesn’t sound okay,” I cut in.

“Shlurp!”

My voice was shrill as I yelled, “Why are you slurping?!”

Celeste closed in with crazy eyes, Alice looked confused, and her two monsters trembled in fear behind her. What a surreal sight.

“What should I do, Ryota?” Alice asked.

“At this point, I guess you’ll just have to hide them.”

“Hide them... Okay. Everyone, come back.”

Boney and Bubbly returned to chibi size again. Alice picked them up and placed them in her pocket, hiding them from view.

“Aww...”

Celeste’s rampage came to an abrupt end, replaced with dejection.

Y’know, she’s kind of a...

“Weirdo,” Eve declared with a smug look.

“You don’t get to call people that!”



Once we all sat in a *calm* circle in the living room, I introduced Alice to everyone.

“I’m Alice! Nice to meet you all!”

“I want to let her join us,” I declared. “What do you guys think?”

“No objections here!” Celeste immediately answered. Everyone knew why.

“Celeste, they’ll avoid you forever if you don’t learn to keep your cool.”

“B-But they’re so cute. They’re sooo cute. They’re as cute as widdle angels!”

They’re monsters...

“I won’t deny that, at least. Eve□”

“I hate low levels,” she interrupted me.

“Figures. Say, Alice, do you like carrots?”

“Sorry. I’m not a fan.”

“Then that means all of Alice’s carrots can go to Eve□”

Eve interrupted, “I vote yes ten thousand times.”

“One vote per person, please!”

Eve’s too easy to convince.

I looked at Emily and asked, “What do you think, Emily?”

“Huh? Sorry, I was thinking about something else.”

“Something else?”

“Alice, make your skeleton big again, please.”

Alice looked to me for advice.

“Eve, hold Celeste back,” I ordered.

“Yes, He Who Carrots,” Eve offered me some indecipherable title, then hugged Celeste from behind. “I have her now.”

“Thanks. Boney, come out!”

Alice returned Boney to regular size.

The bound Celeste squirmed and said, "Aww, it's so darn cute..."

I ignored her for the moment and asked, "Does that work, Emily?"

Emily did not answer; she simply stood up and approached the skeleton.

"I thought so," she mused. "Its clothes are all torn up."

"Huh? Uh, yeah, it's a skeleton."

I hadn't paid it much mind, but indeed, the skeleton's clothes were tattered. All skeletons were like that, though. Even if Boney was cute now, it did still have some shabby threads.

"I feel bad for it."

"Y-You do?"

"Wait a minute."

Emily ran up to the third floor. I wondered what she was up to, but she soon came running back down with a set of clothes in hand.

"Try putting this on," she said to Boney.

"Where'd you get that?"

"I made it for fun."

I didn't even know she had a hobby like that. But, well, she can handle any housework under the sun, so it's no surprise.

Emily put the clothes on the skeleton. However...

"Hooooooh!" Celeste shrieked. She was breaking character more than ever. She flapped her legs to try to run to Boney, but Eve had her in a vice grip.

Now, that aside... I looked Boney up and down as I mulled over my thoughts.

"Are you sure about this outfit?" I asked Emily.

"Do you have a problem with it?"

"I think it's cute," Alice added.

"...Seriously?"

They weren't as intense about their feelings on the matter as Celeste, but Emily and Alice seemed to like it. Was I the only one who didn't think a gothic lolita outfit suited a skeleton?

Indeed, Emily had brought a black gothic lolita dress with tons of lace and frills. It was made to suit any girl, but it instead adorned literal bones.

I just... I don't know what to say about this.

"Boney's a girl, so it works, right?" Alice said.

"Oh, you're right!" Celeste agreed.

Boney rattled as usual, but her skull turned just a tinge red. It seemed she didn't mind it.

In the end, Emily, Celeste, and Eve had no objections to letting Alice in.



With the closing ceremonies of the festival done, the city was beginning to quiet down. It was then that I left with Alice to take her to her new home.

We'd decided to have her stay at the 150,000-piro-per-month two-bedroom apartment where Emily and I had stayed before.

Ostensibly, the reason we were moving her was because we didn't have enough rooms. However, the real reason was that if she stayed in our apartment, the monsters would live in constant fear of Celeste. As such, Alice alone would live in a different space.

Incidentally, the others weren't surprised that she could turn monsters into friends. It was pretty well-known that a rare few could do that, so despite the rarity of it, it came as no surprise to them.

"Sorry to leave you all alone," I apologized.

"No, I love it! I've never had a home, and I assumed I would be

living in the dungeon with these two.”

“Can they walk around town just fine?”

Upon hearing my question, one rattled and the other bounced on Alice’s shoulder. Boney was still in her tattered clothes from before. Her clothing had gone back to normal when she’d returned to chibi size, so we came to the conclusion that she couldn’t wear the dress even if it looked good on her.

“Yep. I can go anywhere with you two, too!” Alice declared as she petted them with a smile.

Though I couldn’t understand them, it seemed they would be happy to follow her anywhere.

“Huh?”

Suddenly, Alice stopped and looked back.

“Something wrong?”

“I heard my name... Is a new one calling me?”

“Hmm. Found another potential friend?”

“Maybe. I dunno.”

“Well, let’s leave it until tomorrow. It’s getting late, and it’s been a long day, so get some sleep.”

“Okay!” Alice agreed.

We walked on for a while until we arrived at the old apartment. When we entered, it still smelled like Emily. Warm, soft... It was full of the warmth imparted by Emily’s housework.

“Go right in.”

“Wow... What an awesome place!”

“We left the place furnished, so you can use whichever room you want.”

“Thanks, Ryota!”

“It’s just a spare apartment. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay! Thank you!”

Alice smiled and hugged me. An embrace of pure gratitude, with no other motive behind it... Honestly, it made me pretty happy.



The next day, we ate breakfast courtesy of Emily. Alice had come first thing in the morning, and Eve had come with carrots to request that Emily cook them. And so, we all enjoyed a meal that was as loud and boisterous as the dinner from the night before.

After eating, I left the apartment, figuring I might as well go farm or something now that the festival was over. Along the way to the dungeon, though, I noticed that the city was...off. It was as loud and busy as ever, but at the same time, everyone looked serious.

That was a stark contrast to the festival mood, sure, but it was also unlike the days before the festival. Something was off, but why?

I've felt this mood before...just once, at some point. But when and where?

While I stopped and looked around, a man called out to me, "Excuse me. Are you Mister Ryota Sato?"

"Yeah. Who are you?"

"Mister Clint Grey sent me. He requests your attendance due to an urgent matter."

"Clint... The dungeon chief, huh?"

The man nodded.

The dungeon chief is looking for me... Something's wrong.



As soon as I entered Clint's office at the Dungeon Association, he stood up and held his arms wide to greet me.

“Thanks for coming. Come take a seat!”

“Sure.”

I sat on the couch across from him, and his secretary poured two cups of coffee.

“How many dozens of sugar cubes would you like?” he asked.

“One cube is fine.”

“Humble as ever, my boy!”

Clint threw a cube of sugar into my coffee before dropping a whole mountain into his. The sugar peeked out over the surface of the coffee like a glacier in the ocean. The madman then drank it. Just the sheer sight of it gave me heartburn.

I averted my eyes and asked, “So, uh, what’s going on here?”

“Well, this morning, all our dungeons stopped dropping items.”

“Huh? All of them...?”

“Tellurium, Silicon, Arsenic, Bismuth, Boron. All five of the dungeons that have brought us prosperity since olden times have stopped dropping things. No matter how many adventurers kill monsters, we haven’t gotten any reports on drops.”

“...Has this happened before?” I asked, realizing just how tense I was.

In a world where all things dropped from monsters in dungeons, the dungeons had stopped dropping things. This was a huge problem. An emergency, even.

“Never,” Clint answered gravely. “This is the first time. The adventurers have been panicking all morning, since, as you know, many adventurers spend all of their money the day they get it.”

“Yeah...”

The adventurers of this world spent money like water. As long as they could go into dungeons, they could make money, so they had no fear as they spent the money they made right away. Mages were the

exception. As magic storms could keep them from going into dungeons, it was common for them to have a nest egg. However, every other adventurer tended to splurge rather than save. That was what kept the economy going, so it hadn't been a problem so far.

"Many of them have taken on loans to buy weapons and armor, as well," Clint added. "They're the ones suffering the most in a situation with no monster drops."

"I see."

The dungeon chief Clint put his hands on his knees and bowed deeply and begged, "You're the only one I can rely on here! You, the man who got all of the rare drops in Selenium! Please save us!"

While his head was still bowed, I replied, "I'll do it."

"Really?!"

"I can't sit by while this happens, so I'll do what I can... No. I'll use every bit of my power to find a solution."

"Thank you! Truly, thank you! Oh, I feel so much better now..."

The dungeon chief seized my hand for a handshake and shook it up and down. I felt strong gratitude, relief, panic, and fear in him, all at the same time.

It was up to me to do something about the disappearance of item drops.

73. The Drop Curse

On B1 of Tellurium, Emily charged forth with her hammer. She had been buffed with the ring that boosted all drops by 1 and the red potion that boosted plant drops by 3. A slime pounced at her, but she moved even faster and smashed it with a counterattack.

The slime disappeared...and that was it.

“It isn’t working at all...” she sighed.

“That’s the tenth one. No way A-rank drops fail ten times in a row.”

“This has never happened before.”

“Which means...”

Emily and I nodded in agreement. Ever since we’d learned of the money outsiders and got the potions needed to boost stats, I’d been letting Emily enjoy the feeling of having A-rank drops, so even she knew that something was off here.

Eve emerged from deeper in the dungeon. Her natural bunny ears flopped downward as she slumped over.

“How was it?” I asked.

“The carrots died...”

“Carrots don’t die... But B2’s a no-go, too, huh?”

We’d split up and had Eve fight the B2 sleep slimes to investigate carrot drops, and now we had our answer.

She wasn’t the only one who felt bad. All of the adventurers around us were in low spirits, too. Screams and shouts of despair could be heard here and there.

“Damn it, where are my drops?!”

“This sucks! I can’t pay off my debt this evening like this!”

“Tch! I’m tired of this! If anyone needs me, I’m goin’ drinkin’!”

One after another, adventurers gave up on dungeoneering for the day. There were way fewer people here than usual. Drops had disappeared—not just reduced, but *disappeared*. I'd heard as much before, but coming here made me realize that things were a lot worse than I'd thought.

This time, Celeste came from outside the dungeon. We'd had her look around the city.

“Ryota,” she called out to me.

“What's up?”

“Things aren't good,” she said in a somber tone. “People are panic-buying things all over the place now that there aren't drops. The market's all out of vegetables.”

Panic-buying, huh? I had a feeling, but it happened a lot sooner than I'd expected.

“That's bad.”

“By the way, Yoda, do you get drops?”

“Me? Good question.”

A slime just happened to pass by, so I whipped out a gun and fired a normal round at it. It pierced through the slime and blew it away—and I received bean sprouts!

“Wow! Yoda, you got dro—” Emily piped up, but I put a hand over her mouth. Then, I swiped the bean sprouts, threw them into the magic cart, and glanced around. Fortunately, it seemed nobody had noticed that drop.

“Mph! Mmghmph!”

“Oh, sorry. Just pipe down for a second.”

“Mgh...” Emily grumbled and nodded in assent, so I removed my hand. “Haaah... I thought you were going to kill me.”

“Sorry, sorry. Celeste and Eve, you keep quiet, too.”

“Of course.”

“The bunny demands a hush fee.”

“I’ll pay double once this is over.”

Eve agreed to that. She was too easy to control.

“But why do only you get them? Could it be...because of that?”

Emily asked.

“Yeah... That must be it,” I agreed.

We were both thinking the same thing: *S-rank drops*.

“Even A-ranks couldn’t do it, but Yoda can... It’s almost like they’re outsiders.”

“That or monsters from Niho□wait.”

A flash of inspiration struck me. I turned and ran.

“Yoda?!”

“Where are you going?”

I shook off Emily and Celeste’s yells as I ran from the dungeon. When I left Tellurium, I ran into Alice.

“Ryota? Why are you in such a hurry?” she asked.

“Perfect timing, Alice! You mentioned a new friend last night, right?”

“Y-Yeah, I did...”

“Which way?”

Alice looked around before pointing to her right.

“Umm... That way?”

“That way... I thought so!”

“Ah! Ryota, wait!”

I ignored Alice, too, as I continued running. I ran as fast as I could...until I reached Nihonium.

“Haaah, haaah... I knew it.”

As I caught my breath, I loaded bullets in both guns. The air leaking out of this dungeon was the air of a dungeon whose master had appeared. I prepared myself and stepped inside.

Normally, B1 of Nihonium was teeming with skeletons□but none were present now. No matter how much I walked, I didn't run into any. It was empty.

When dungeon masters appeared, all other monsters in the dungeon disappeared. If they remained for too long, they could change the whole ecosystem within.

One had appeared here... It was just like back in Selenium. This dungeon's special status, which only allowed me to receive drops, had spread through Cyclo.

"So that means the drops have disappeared from Cyclo because of this dungeon master's appearance?" I mused.

I had no solid proof□all I had was circumstantial evidence□but Nihonium's air felt just like that of Selenium when the dungeon master had appeared. It also felt just like when I'd left the apartment this morning...

"Why didn't I remember it sooner?! Geez!" I yelled at myself as I went through the dungeon, guns at the ready. It was almost certain that Nihonium's dungeon master was behind this drop disappearance.

I searched every nook and cranny of B1, but found nothing. I tried B2 and B3 right after that, but nothing turned up there, either. However, the moment I stepped foot on B4, I felt the dungeon master's presence more intensely than before.

"Ngh..."

It's gotta be on this floor.

I stopped there and switched bullets, loading all six of the rounds I had: normal, freeze, flame, recovery, restraining, and homing. I wanted to be ready no matter what the dungeon master was like; after all, I had no idea what it might do.

After that, I headed in the direction I felt it coming from...and before long, I found it. It was a humanoid monster that was just over

five feet tall. It resembled a woman. She had long hair, probably more than six feet long, that trailed on the floor behind her. She was also buck naked. But it wasn't sexy; in fact, it sent a chill down my back.

Perhaps that came from her eerie expressionless features and the odd glow coming from her pale skin. I didn't sense any life in her. Intuitively, I knew that she was some kind of zombie or ghost.

"You're the dungeon master, right? Can you talk?" I demanded, aiming my guns at her.

She did not respond.

I'd tried conversation, since she looked human, but that was a mistake. Her silhouette flickered.

"...!"

The very next instant, there was a glow right in front of me. I crossed my arms to guard, but an impact ran through my body, blowing me away.

I righted my posture midair and landed safely. It seemed the dungeon master had kicked me. My arm was numb; despite my S-rank HP and Vitality, that had hurt. Still, this made things easier. Even if she looked human, so long as I knew she was a monster, all I had to do was kill.

I aimed my guns and fired all of my rounds in one barrage. Since I wasn't sure what would work on her, I tried everything.

"They went through her?!" I screamed.

All twelve bullets had passed right through the dungeon master's body and smacked into the wall behind her. Even the homing rounds were buried in the wall.

The dungeon master came at me again.

Man, she's fast!

This time, she had jumped up to kick me from above. I raised my arms and guarded, but she broke through it and struck my head,

launching me away again and sending me slamming into the wall.

This time, I loaded twelve normal bullets and fired. They once again slipped through her. Several even ricocheted off the cave walls.

She attacked a third time. Now that I was used to her speed, I evaded and fired more. The bullets passed through and ricocheted, and I was subjected to a front kick in the belly. I managed to keep myself from flying away, but I fell to one knee. I held my stomach. Vomit tried to rush out, but I managed to hold it down by force.

She was strong. Strong and hard to hit.

Is there no way for me to attack her?

Just then, I realized that blood was flowing from the dungeon master's foot. It was the same foot she'd kicked me with.

She raised her foot and dug a finger into where it was bleeding. The sight was so terrifying that just watching it made me hurt.

The dungeon master dug a bullet out of her foot. Had I hit her somehow?

And wait, isn't that□?

The dungeon master's form flickered once more. This was the fourth time, so I knew what was coming. As she approached to kick me, I countered by firing a bullet. My single bullet pierced through her foot.

I blocked her kick, which was just as powerful as the previous ones, and used the force of it to put some distance between us.

I knew it. So she's normally incorporeal, but when she attacks□

Suddenly, there was an impact to my side. I was launched once more without even knowing what had happened, colliding with a wall again. My mind was spinning. I saw stars. I understood, far too late, that she'd attacked faster than I could perceive it.

"You can move even faster?!"

I stood up while bracing my knees, then loaded twelve more bullets. Then, I fired them all at the dungeon master's feet. They all

passed through and buried themselves in the ground. I loaded and fired twelve more, all with the same result.

She smirked. The expressionless dungeon master curled one side of her lips upward. She was mocking me. It was as if she was saying, *It's useless. Useless!*

Right after that, she flickered once more. She was coming at me with imperceptible speed.

I didn't move. With a faint flash of light, twenty-four bullets followed after her like shooting stars!

“...!”

There was a scream like none I'd ever heard before as all the lights stopped at once. The dungeon master fell forward onto the ground, as if she'd tripped. Her right leg and both arms were full of holes. She looked at her limbs in utter disbelief.

“So you were using your arms, too, huh?” I mused.

She glared at me, as if to demand, *What did you do?!*

“I'd thought the first one you dug out had ricocheted, but I was wrong. The one you dug out wasn't a normal bullet; it was a homing round,” I explained. The dungeon master looked confused.

“My first two homing rounds reacted when you turned corporeal to attack me, flying out of the wall and homing in on you. I noticed that, so I fired all the rest of my homing rounds at your feet.”

“...!”

The dungeon master whipped around and looked to where she'd once stood. The floor there had a big hole gouged out of it thanks to the bullets that had changed direction and hit her.

“All twenty-four of those bullets reacted to your attack. You're fast—faster than me—but it looks like you're not faster than a speeding bullet.”

I loaded more bullets and approached. Due to the damage she'd

sustained, the dungeon master's form was clearer than it was before. I readied my gun and fired a single normal bullet, which pierced through her brow and chest.

After glaring at me with pure hatred in her eyes, the dungeon master disappeared. The dungeon's atmosphere then returned to normal.

"Phew..." I sighed as I tottered and fell onto my butt.

I'd taken plenty of hits. That last one had involved not just a kick, but some punches as well. As evidence of that, I was hurt all over.

It was a narrow victory. She was a tough foe, faster than a human with S-rank speed and only corporeal when she attacked. It really was...a close call.

"Man... I don't wanna do anything else today."

Thus, I fell onto my back and stared at the ceiling, arms and legs splayed. And I rested there until Emily came looking for me.

74. Crystallized EXP

While I was on my back, I saw Emily's panicked face straight above me.

"Yoda! Yoda, are you okay?!"

When she arrived, she saw me on the ground and worried for my safety.

"I'm fine," I assured her.

"But you're injured!"

"No problem. If I just do this..."

With tortured motions, I loaded recovery rounds into my gun and injected myself in the arm with them. They took effect and healed my injuries right away.

Yep, feels better.

"Thank goodness... What happened?"

"More importantly..." I looked around and saw a mummy off in the distance. "There are monsters here. Emily, how are the drops in town?"

"Oh! Right, that's the whole reason I came. Drops have just returned to all of the dungeons."

"Thought so."

"Did you bring them back, Yoda?" Emily asked, her expression a mixture of surprise and respect.

"Yeah. There was a dungeon master here. I guess Nihonium's dungeon master turns off the drops all over town."

"Oh... The dungeon master of a dungeon without drops..."

"That's what I figured. Man, what a crazy power... Turning off the drops all over town is a downright natural disaster. I'd call it worse than a magic storm."

“It is disastrous. But you stopped it, Yoda!”

“I guess.”

I’d barely come out on top, after all. I’d found a way to beat her, though. If she came back, maybe I’d trounce her.

“Now, how about we go back and report to Clint?”

“Wait a second,” Emily said as she pointed to the ground nearby.

“There’s something on the ground over there.”

“Is this...the dungeon master’s drop?”

I picked up the ring on the ground.



At the Dungeon Association, dungeon chief Clint seized my hand once again.

“Thank you, sir! Thank you so much! You’ve saved Cyclo!”

“C’mon, you’re exaggerating.”

“Never! You may not know it, but everything flew off the shelves once the drops stopped flowing in.”

“Celeste mentioned that. People panic-bought all the vegetables, right?”

“More than just the vegetables!” he declared. “People started panic-buying *everything*!”

“Are you serious?!”

“That just goes to show how scared people were. If that went on for much longer, who knows how things might’ve escalated? So, I have to say...” Clint trailed off there as he gazed at me with all of his gratitude, squeezing my hand so hard that it hurt. “Thank you so very much!”

“...I just did what anyone else would have. It’s not like I can live without drops, either.”

“Be that as it may, you’ve saved Cyclo. We have to thank you... I know! How about a year’s worth of the finest sugar?!”

“I don’t need that much sugar! Also, how much is a year’s worth to you?!”

“About a hundred thousand sugar cubes. Why do you ask?”

“Do you consume three hundred cubes a day?!”

“Mmm, perhaps sugar cubes are too cheap to show our gratitude. How about a year’s worth of the finest honey? No, better□”

“Please, enough sweeteners!”

This is bad. If I let him thank me, I’m gonna be doomed to a life of diabetes!

The only thing I wanted a year’s worth of was kagami mochi, because then I’d only get *one*. A year’s worth of anything else was too vague for me to risk it.

I managed to back out of receiving his thanks and scurried away from the Dungeon Association.



I left the Dungeon Association and walked through town with Emily. Despite the previous chaos, Cyclo was back to its usual state.

“Hey, they say the drops are back!”

“For real? What happened?”

“I hear a dungeon master appeared in Nihonium, and that’s what caused it.”

“A DM, really? Man, what a troublemaker.”

Once people learned it was because of a dungeon master, they understood everything. That made sense, since they were people who lived in a world where everything revolved around dungeons.

“You’re incredible, Yoda, for solving all of that on your own. It

would've taken so much longer if you weren't around."

"Yeah, I guess... I'm the only one who goes to Nihonium, save for very occasional visits from Princess Margaret."

"Nobody goes to places without drops, so it would've taken a long time for anyone to notice the dungeon master."

Who would even imagine it was the cause?

"I want to tell everyone in the city that you fixed it," Emily added.

"Please don't. I don't want too many eyes on me. The drop disappearance is solved, and that's enough for me."

"Agreed."

Emily soon gave up, but she seemed more eager than usual. I, on the other hand, was just getting started.

"...Let's go to a dungeon. I wanna try out this thing we picked up."

I changed the subject and showed Emily the ring that the dungeon master had dropped.



We went to B1 of Nihonium. We'd tried Tellurium, but it was too full of adventurers after the return of drops, so we came here instead.

"What are we doing?" Emily asked.

"I'll wear this and defeat a monster. You just wait, Emily."

"Okay," she assented.

I put the ring on. It was big enough to be loose anywhere but my thumb, so I placed it there.

When I encountered a skeleton, I fired a normal bullet, killing it. The seed it dropped was then sucked into my pouch.

"Have you gotten better at this, Yoda?"

“Hm? Maybe. It used to be pretty hard for me to kill skeletons with normal bullets.”

“You took it down in one shot this time.”

Another skeleton appeared, and I took it down in one shot again. A wall crumbled, and a skeleton ambushed me from within. I finished it off with one shot as soon as it appeared.

Emily followed me as I mowed down skeletons.

“You’re getting stronger, but aren’t you doing the same thing as usual?” she asked me.

“Yep.”

“Is the ring not doing anything, then?”

“No, I think it’ll work in just a sec□”

Two skeletons appeared from beyond a corner, so I fired twice to kill them. Right after their seeds went into my pouch, the ring started glowing.

“Wh-What’s happening?”

“There it is.”

I held out my hand flat, and then faced my palm forward. Light gathered in my hand and became a four-inch crystal.

“Is this a new drop?”

“Nope, not a drop. Try holding it.”

“Okay... Ah!”

When Emily took it, the crystal emitted light and melted away.

“Ack! Wh-What happened? It disappeared!”

“Calm down. I think it’s fine.”

“You think□Oh!”

After panicking over the crystal’s disappearance, Emily stopped. Panic turned into surprise and then to joy.

“Yoda!” she gasped.

“Did it work?”

“Yes! I’ve gone up to level 29! What is it, though?”

“Turns out this ring lets you crystallize experience points once you’ve reached your level cap, allowing you to give it to others.”

“It crystallizes experience?! I’ve never heard of that happening.”

“Really?”

“Yes! That’s incredible!” Emily exclaimed, floored by the ability of the new item in our arsenal.

I’d assumed it wasn’t normal. It had come from the dungeon master of Nihonium, so I wasn’t surprised. Instead, I was pretty happy.

Level 1 was my cap, so I’d felt bad about all the EXP I’d wasted so far. But now, I could give that wasted EXP to my friends who needed it.

This item was great.

75. Level 95

The next morning, I resumed my regularly scheduled visits to Nihonium. When I went down to B1, I found Princess Margaret's group. The leader, four monster-weakners, and the princess herself—the usual group of six.

“Hey there, Sato,” the leader greeted me. “We meet again.”

“Heya. Making lots of air today, I see.”

There was a huge pile of Pandora's Boxes sitting next to the leader. They were all air boxes with Princess Margaret's face printed on them.

“Yeah, they're still selling like hotcakes. We'll farm until she can't farm anymore today.”

“I haven't seen you here recently. What've you been up to?”

“We were seeing whether or not we could try that business venture you suggested.”

“Me? Oh...you mean the rings?” I recalled our last conversation. He'd racked his brain over whether they could sell anything aside from boxed air, and I'd brought up the idea of selling rings and calling them gifts from Princess Margaret. “How'd that turn out?”

“Well...most of the dungeons that drop rings are being monopolized by huge families.”

“By families?”

That made me remember the situation with the rice. The only rice-dropping floor in all of Cyclo, B6 of Silicon, had been monopolized by the Adalbard Gang. It seemed that wasn't unique to just that matter.

“They suppress the quality and quantity of output there. We tried a few places, and we did find a place that wasn't monopolized by

groups like them, but...”

“But?”

“The dragon there is too much for the princess to handle, so we gave up on it,” the man explained as he shrugged in surrender.

I watched them fight. As usual, the four men were weakening the monster, while Princess Margaret dealt the killing blow. Even that single attack looked unsteady; she could barely hold the sword right. Still, her weakness and beauty made her a picture-perfect princess.

“Yeah, she’s not beating a dragon like that,” I mused.

“Right? The princess has even reached such a high level, too...”

“She has?” I asked.

The man puffed out his chest with pride and replied, “Listen and be amazed. The princess’s maximum level is 99, and her current level is 94!”

“What?!”

“Her stats and drops are tragically all F, however. She hasn’t gained a single rank since level 1.”

“Are you serious?!”

“Of course. Levels don’t necessarily correlate to strength, my man.”

That’s true. Your strength comes from your stats, not your level. I’m stuck at level 1, but with stat seeds, I’ve gotten pretty strong.

And yet, it seemed there were people who had the opposite problem, with high levels and crappy stats. Level 94 with F in every stat... I kind of wanted to see her status screen.

The leader added, “I think she’ll be level 95 soon, but it’s not like we’re expecting much.”

While we talked, she defeated a skeleton. One of the men ran over with a Pandora’s Box full of air, while the other three guided her back.

“Eep!”

When the princess saw me, she blushed and ran away. The three men guarding her rushed to catch up to her.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Now that you mention it...” their leader trailed off, staring right into my eyes all the while. “Sato, you saved the princess last time we met, didn’t you?”

“Huh? Oh, I guess I do remember that.”

He sighed and mumbled, “So that’s it...”

“Huh? What’s it?”

The leader sighed even deeper this time, only confusing me further.



It seemed Princess Margaret couldn’t do her job while I was there, so I continued down to B2. Once there, I confirmed that my pouch was empty and that I was wearing the ring on my thumb. Next, I loaded plenty of normal bullets and walked through the dungeon.

When zombies appeared, I killed them and their seeds went into my pouch. I ran around the floor in efficiency mode, killing things when they appeared and dealing with them with the minimal effort required when ambushed.

On my tenth zombie kill, a crystal formed. The effects of the ring made it so that I could create these using the overflow EXP I received for being capped. I put it away and searched for more zombies.

B2 and beyond of Nihonium had no adventurers, so I could fight one enemy after another.

Once I’d defeated ten more, I had a second crystal. This seemed pretty stable, but just in case, I hunted more.

On my thirtieth total kill, I received my third crystal. There was no doubting it now.

“One crystal per ten zombies, huh?”

I took out the two crystals from before and arranged them in my palm. Three crystals, all the same size, gleamed in the dungeon’s meager light.

This was a feeling of productivity I’d yet to experience. I’d never cared about experience points before due to my level 1 cap, but being able to hold EXP in my hand made me feel even more accomplished as I defeated monsters and received their drops.



Once I had five crystals, I left the dungeon. Princess Margaret’s group wasn’t on B1 anymore, so I figured they must’ve wrapped up for the day.

When I stepped outside, I dropped the contents of my pouch on the ground. Then, I backed off and mulled over my thoughts while I waited for them to become outsiders.

Once I defeated them and got flame rounds, my morning would be pretty much done. I didn’t actually have to do anything more than usual, so it didn’t affect my pace. In other words, if I worked at my usual pace, I would have five EXP crystals before noon every day.

My first goal had been to quantify that very figure. A trip with a full cart earned about 40,000 piros, while a full day’s worth of normal drops was about 200,000 piros. I wanted to quantify EXP crystal earnings as I had with them.

While I thought about it, fifty zombie outsiders popped up all at once. I prepped my normal rounds to deal with them.

Once I take these guys down, I’ll meet up with the others for our

afternoon dungeoneering.

“Eek!”

Suddenly, I heard a feminine shriek from behind the zombies.

Oh, no! Did someone wander this way?

Worse, that wasn't an adventurer's scream; it was that of a normal girl.

I dumped the normal bullets, switched to restraining rounds, and fired them all. The zombies were trapped in ropes of light. I charged into the crowd, killed some with my bare hands until I'd broken through, and beelined toward the source of the cry for help. There, I saw a familiar girl who'd fallen on her backside.

“Princess?!”

It was Margaret herself. She was in the same outfit as when I'd seen her before, but now, she didn't have a weapon. Zombies that had escaped their restraints tried to attack her. She looked too terrified to move.

“Get away!” I charged forward and grabbed the head of a groaning zombie just before it could bite her. Then, I crushed its head in my hand.

“Are you okay?!”

She didn't answer. Instead, she just hugged me. Or rather, she clung to me. Her small form was quivering as she buried her face in my chest.

“Relax. I've got you now.”

I put an arm around her hip and jumped back, readying my gun with my free arm. Now that I'd gotten her out of there, we were in the clear.

I reloaded with one hand and fired away, clearing out the horde of zombies. It was harder to do with a girl in one arm, but zombies were rather weak, luckily. However, because I had to focus more than

usual, I didn't notice that Margaret had stopped quivering and started staring at my face from close up.



After confirming that I'd killed all fifty zombies, I asked the girl in my arms, "You okay?"

For some reason, she just stared at me vacantly.

"Are you hurt at all?" I urged.

"..."

"Margaret?"

She didn't answer, so I reached out to give her a light slap on the cheek.

"Eep!"

When my hand approached, Margaret came to and pushed me away. She took me by surprise, escaping my grasp and making me lose balance. The five crystals I'd put away fell on the ground.

Before I picked them up, I looked at Margaret again. Her face was red. She looked down and fidgeted, occasionally glancing up at me.

"What's up? Something wrong?"

"N-Nothing..."

"Hm? You're not hurt, right?"

Margaret nodded, still blushing.

She's acting weird, but now that I think about it, she's been off all day. Still, she's not hurt, so there's no reason for me to pry. It's dangerous here; I'd better escort her back to town, I thought to myself as I moved to pick up the crystals.

"I-I'll get them!"

"Hey, hold it□"

I had no time to stop her as she snatched up the crystals. Then,

they disappeared in her hand.

“Huh?” Margaret mumbled, surprised.

Here, I learned another trait of the crystals: it seemed that if anyone other than me touched them, they immediately disappeared. That had happened with Emily, too, so I figured it must have become EXP for Margaret now.

What about Alice, then? She's at her level cap, so would they disappear if she held them? Maybe we should test that out when we meet up later.

“Oh... I've leveled up,” Margaret said.

“Really? Right, that guy did say you were almost 95. Well, congratulations.”

It seemed those crystals had pushed her over the edge.

“Thank you very much.”

“How are your stats now?” I asked, recalling what the leader had said. This revived my interest.

Margaret began looking around and asked, “Is there a status board around here...?”

“I guess the one at Nihonium is the closest?”

Margaret nodded.

We walked together to Nihonium. As soon as we arrived, Margaret brought up her stats on the status board.

“Oooh...” I piped up. This was the highest cap I'd seen yet, along with the highest level. And yet, her stats were F all the way down. Honestly, it was kind of impressive.

“Figures...” she sighed.

“Hm?”

“Oh, nothing.”

Princess Margaret looked sad for a moment. I knew I wasn't just imagining it. That was the despair of someone whose efforts were

never rewarded. She must have felt distraught every single time she leveled up. I wished I could do something for her.

Margaret sadly switched the status board to the next page.

“Oh?” she gasped.

“What the...?”

This page was *not* F all the way down; each stat had risen, making them E.

“They’ve gone up! They’ve gone up!” Margaret squealed happily.

At level 95, her stats had finally risen. Even if they were just E, that was cause for celebration. However, I did not celebrate. For, you see, I had realized something. And I was only able to realize it because I wasn’t as overwhelmed with joy as Margaret was.

“E, D, C, B, A... 5, 6, 7, 8, 9...” I counted on the fingers of both hands and hit upon one conclusion. It wasn’t guaranteed, but it seemed more than plausible.

76. Perpetual Motion

Once her excitement had settled, Margaret asked, “By the way, what were those crystals? Is this the experience-selling I’ve heard of?”

Experience-selling... Oh, she must mean those things at the Harvest Festival.

The monsters gave a ton of EXP, but there was so little interest in their drops that they were inexpensive. Turning them into outsiders to kill for EXP was the essence of experience-selling.

The crystals I’d given her did not fall into that category, but she didn’t actually know the process involved in experience-selling; she only knew the term.

“It’s a little different,” I explained. “This ring lets me turn excess EXP over my cap into crystals that I can give to others.”

“Is that it?”

“More importantly...I want to raise your level.”

I looked Margaret right in the eyes. She blushed and looked down.

“Mine...?”

“If I’m not wrong, we’ll witness something incredible when you reach your level cap.”

Margaret cocked her head as far as it could go. Did she not realize, even after seeing the status board before? Was common sense alluding her, or had she simply gotten used to having F in every stat?

At level 99, she’d have A in all drop stats. I figured she was probably a late bloomer, but the same thought hadn’t occurred to her yet.

Now, how can we most efficiently raise her level?

That was our sole problem.



About an hour later, we stood before a giant pile of bean sprouts. We had created this small mountain on the outskirts of Nihonium.

One million piros worth of bean sprouts is a hell of a sight.

Incidentally, I'd come up with the bean sprout idea, but Margaret paid the money. It seemed she had plenty of savings. When I'd said that we could use as many bean sprouts as we could get, she'd said that she would prepare a million piros.

By the way, we'd bought out the entire stock of bean sprouts in Cyclo.

"Sorry for making you spend so much," I apologized to her.

"Oh, it's nothing. More importantly, what do we plan to do with these?"

"Just watch."

Margaret and I stepped away from the mountain of bean sprouts. After we waited a while, a single slime popped out of the pile. We were in a place without people, so as soon as it appeared, it came our way.

I shot the slime with a regular bullet; it died in one hit.

More slimes appeared, and I finished them off before they could even move. It was then that Margaret understood what I was doing.

"Are we turning bean sprouts into experience points?!"

"Yep. This is the kind of experience-selling people usually refer to. Apparently, it's supposed to involve things called Mecha Mice, since they're more efficient, but Cyclo doesn't have those."

That merchant had probably gone back home by now, too.

Slimes appeared one after another. Each time, I mopped them up in seconds.

“That’s incredible. Your accuracy is perfect! To think you could kill so many monsters without so much as moving...” Margaret said, gazing reverently at me.

I’d picked slime bean sprouts for this long power leveling session for two reasons. First, I could defeat them as soon as they spawned. As long as I could see them, I could take slimes down with 99% accuracy. As for the other reason...

I took normal bullets from my hip pouch and loaded them into my empty gun. Thanks to my pouch that sucked up drops, I could kill outsider slimes and replenish regular bullets without so much as moving.

I defeated slimes with regular bullets, and regular bullets were deposited into my pouch. It was like a perpetual motion machine given the sheer number that were spawning.

Like zombies, slimes created one crystal per ten defeated. Whenever the crystals appeared, I gave them to Margaret.

Defeat slimes, automatically replenish bullets, give away EXP—we repeated this process over and over.

Occasionally, adventurers passed by in the distance. They looked at us and either cocked their heads in confusion or laughed. The former were people who didn’t know why we’d kill outsider slimes, while the latter were people who knew we were trying to get EXP. In this world, most people saw their level as something that went up over time while they focused on farming, so I couldn’t blame them for laughing.

After a while, sweat got in my eye. I blinked rapidly to try to get it out.

Do this for a long time, and of course you’ll get tired.

I noticed a nice smell. I realized that Margaret was wiping away my sweat with a handkerchief. Did that smell come from the

handkerchief, or from her? I didn't know, but it smelled nice. Like fruit or flowers, almost.

"Thanks."

"No, I should be the one thanking you. I've never gained experience at such a fast rate before."

"That so?"

"I am so weak that I can't even defeat a slime on my own."

"Oh... Yeah, you can't beat them unless someone weakens them for you, huh?"

Margaret nodded and added, "I wish I could at least raise my MP."

"Why's that?"

"Through my level ups, I've learned some incredible magic. Like the life-suspending Eternal and the ultimate fire magic Phoenix, for example."

"That *is* some incredible magic!"

I hadn't expected that from her of all people.

"I have around ten spells like that."

"Now that's insane!"

"But I can't use any of them," she sighed. "I won't be able to fire a single one unless my MP goes to D."

"Tch. Not enough MP, huh?"

She was a lot like Celeste in that regard.

Margaret and I chatted as I took down more slimes. The 1,000,000-piro pile of bean sprouts gradually shrank.

I hadn't moved from my initial spot as I kept on hunting them. Since I was using the outsider slime perpetual motion machine, I actually preferred to stay in this one spot.

The machine continued to function until the very end. When the sun had set in the west and twilight came, I finished off the final

slime. It created the final crystal, which I gave to Margaret.

“How’s it looking?” I asked.

“I’m still just a little short.”

“Even a million piros couldn’t do it? Guess you can’t help that, since you’re going from 95 to 96.”

“We could order more... Oh, but I suppose they’re out of stock.”

“And going to Tellurium now would be even more inefficient.”

Oh well. Guess the level up will have to wait.

But while I gave up, someone called out to me.

“Yoda!”

I turned toward the source of the voice and saw Emily, Celeste, Eve, and Alice. The girls were hauling another mountain of bean sprouts my way.

“What are you all doing?”

“Low-level liar,” Eve said as she chopped my head.

“Huh?”

“You skipped our afternoon carrots,” she pouted.

“Oh, darn, sorry! I got so carried away here.”

Whenever we all went dungeoneering together, we’d stop on B2 on the way down to get carrots for Eve.

“Carried away?!” Celeste gasped. “You got ‘carried away’ with her? No, no, Ryota would never do something like that. It must be like what happened with me—wait, isn’t that worse?!”

“Celeste, is something wrong? It sounds like you’re in a heated argument...with yourself.”

“She’s fine,” Emily said. “More importantly, we brought bean sprouts for you, Yoda.”

“Thanks... But why?”

“We heard from other adventurers that you were doing this here.”

“You’re so cool, Ryota!” Alice piped up, excited. “Everyone was

talking about ‘*the* leader of the Ryota family.’ I didn’t know you were so famous!”

They were talking about me? Oh, I guess the adventurers who passed by must have gone into town and spread rumors.

“Right. When we heard about it, we decided to bring you more.”

They’d brought a whole ton of bean sprouts. It was a fair bit less than our first batch, but I’d estimate it to be about 200,000 piros worth.

“You guys farmed this for us?” I asked them.

Emily lifted her hammer, Celeste held out her Bicorn Horns, Alice returned Boney and Bubbly to monster size, and Eve took out a carrot.

“What does the carrot have to do with farming bean sprouts?!” I exclaimed. Then, I looked at my four friends and said, “Thank you all.”

They all responded with smiles.



Later that night, we returned to the entrance of Nihonium. Margaret approached the status board and used it.

Everyone cheered. Thanks to their help, her level had risen to 96.

“...”

Margaret turned and looked at me. Even I felt my heartbeat quicken. Had it worked...or was it a one-time fluke?

My heart pounded as I nodded to Margaret. She took a deep breath and tapped the status board again.

Gulp!

Level 96. All drops, D. I was almost certain we were on a path to all A’s now.

Everyone cheered once more, since I’d explained my theory ahead

of time.

“Thank you!” Margaret yelled excitedly as she pulled me into a hug with her slender arms. I could tell she was happy.

I was tired from killing slimes at such an insane pace, but it was good to see that my effort had paid off.

77. Emily and Celeste

Margaret and I visited the air salesman together. She took me to a place that, according to the sign out front, was called Alkive Sihar. The building looked more like an office or shop than a civilian home.

When we stepped inside, the man was surprised to see us together, but he ushered us further in. He then took us to the reception room, where we sat facing each other.

“What’s with the sign out front?” I asked.

“It’s my name. I named the office after me.”

“Oh, that’s it?”

The man...apparently named Alkive, furrowed his brow and looked at me, then Margaret, then back at me.

“Why are you with the princess?”

“We were raising her level together today,” I explained.

I’d happened to witness her leveling up, predicted that all of her drop rates might go up to A if she got to level 99, and helped her level up once more. As a result, she was level 96 with all D-rank drops. I added that I was certain that my theory was true by now.

At first, the man looked angry, like a father who was scared a man might steal his daughter. However, that gradually turned into surprise.

“Is that true, Princess?!” he asked, delighted.

Margaret silently nodded. She seemed much calmer than before. Her graceful demeanor truly gave off the air of a princess.

“Wow... Still, you can’t be certain that she’ll have all A-rank drops when she reaches level 99.”

“Her stats never went up, all the way through level 94. Right?”

“Yeah, and?”

“At 95, they all went up to E. At 96, they all went up to D. In these cases, you can be damn sure they’ll go to A.”

I wasn’t from this world, but I’d learned a lot about how things worked by now. If you didn’t grow at all at first, then started growing toward the end, you’d max out your stats at the end of it. That was an ironclad rule. Like how if you promise someone you’ll get married when the war ends, you’ll die in the war. Or if you drink soda, you’ll start belching.

“I-I mean, if you say so,” Alkive replied. “You’re the leader of the famous Ryota family, after all.”

It surprised me how suddenly he had agreed with me. I thought I’d made a pretty convincing argument about the trope, but he’d just agreed because of my status. I appreciated that, but it felt a little weird.

“But, hmm...all A’s at level 99, huh?” he mused.

“She’ll be able to do a lot of new things as a result,” I replied.

“Huh? Well, I guess.”

“What, did you have something else in mind?”

“Yeah. Just thinking about how we might be able to profit off of her leveling process.”

“Aha!” I chuckled. Alkive was a salesman through and through.

I’d figured they could make a lot more money once she had A-rank in every drop, but he was looking for ways to make money off of the road there. The thought had never occurred to me. But once he came up with the idea, that led to more.

“Have you heard of a city called Alkyl?” I asked.

“Alkyl? The Mecha City, you mean?”

I’d never heard of it being called the Mecha City, but since I knew about Mecha Mice, I figured he had the right idea.

“How about you put together a tour of the place with Princess

Margaret?”

“A tour?”

“Yeah. You tell people they get a chance to help the princess level up, and then you use the same basic process you’ve been using to make boxes of air, but at Alkyl.”

“You’re a genius!” Alkive roared as he jumped up, a smile spreading across his glum face. “You’re right! If we get the princess’s fans to help her level up, it’ll be easy! And we can even make them pay for the opportunity! That’s two birds with one stone!”

Yeah, figures she would have fans.

I was satisfied to know that my prediction was correct.

“*All riiight!*” Alkive shouted. “Time to let the hundred thousand people in her fanclub know about this!”

“She has a hundred thousand fans?! That’s insane!”

“Thank you, Sato! Because of you, we’re going to make some real money. Let us thank you somehow!”

He seized my hand and shook it up and down. Given how powerful that handshake was, he must’ve had a hell of a get-rich-quick scheme in mind.

Thank me? Hmm...

I thought for a while and looked at Margaret, who gazed up at me with a smile.

“In that case...”

I told Alkive exactly how he could thank me.



When the next morning arrived, I did not go into my usual dungeons; instead, I met with Emily, Celeste, Eve, and Alice as a full family near Nihonium at Cyclo’s outskirts. This was where I’d helped Princess

Margaret level up yesterday.

“This is...incredible,” Celeste mused.

“That’s a whole mountain of carrots,” Emily added.

They were impressed by the pile of carrots, which was about as big as yesterday’s bean sprout pile.

A young man who seemed to be on guard duty ran over to speak to me.

“You’re Sato, right?”

He looked familiar; on closer inspection, he seemed to be one of the four men who helped Princess Margaret make boxes of air.

“Yeah, I’m Ryota Sato.”

“Here’s the million piros worth of product you asked for.”

“You went for carrots?”

“They couldn’t get us bean sprouts.”

“Figures.”

We’d bought out the bean sprouts yesterday, after all.

“Carrot transfer complete! Later,” the man said as he left.

This was the favor I’d asked Alkive for yesterday.

“All right, let’s get to it!” I announced.

“Yoda, I don’t see Margaret here today.”

“If you already have the carrots, then what do you need us for?” Celeste asked. A fair question, indeed.

I explained to my friends, “I’d like to help you all raise your levels today. I can crystallize experience points now, and I even managed to make a perpetual motion machine with Tellurium’s outsiders yesterday. Might as well help everyone get up to speed, right?”

“You mean...”

“Our levels?”

Emily and Celeste were startled.

“Yeah, you two still have room to grow. Is that a problem?”

“Objection!” Eve exclaimed, pushing them aside just as they began to nervously agree to it. “I cannot stand by as carrots are wasted.”

“It’s not a waste. I’m turning them into EXP.”

“Carrots are meant to be eaten.”

“True, but...”

“You’ll waste carrots over this bunny’s dead body,” Eve declared as she stood in front of Carrot Mountain and held her arms out to block my path.

As usual, she was a different person when it came to carrots.

“Sometimes, we have to suffer to grow,” Emily said, trying to persuade her.

“Yeah. If you’re patient now, Ryota can bring you even tastier carrots to make up for it!” Celeste insisted.

Eve’s attitude softened somewhat as she looked at me.

Good grief. Fine, I’ll do it.

“I promise that, once everyone’s levels are capped, I’ll bring you carrots.”

“Ryota carrots?”

“Ryota carrots, yes.”

“I want one year’s worth.”

“That’s way too many!”

Geez. Like I say, the only thing I want to see a year’s worth of is kagami mochi. Ugh, whatever; she looks cute when she’s eating carrots, anyway.

“Fine, I promise,” I surrendered.

“Then I will be patient.”

Eve nodded and backed off. She then turned and ran away in some other direction. I’d thought she was leaving, but no, she plopped down far enough that she wouldn’t interfere with the outsider-creating

process.

“Why are you sitting there?” I asked.

“It’s downwind.”

“Come again?”

“If I can’t eat them, I at least want to smell them.”

“O-Okay...”

“Front row seats...”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I replied.

She did not react. It seemed she did just want to smell them...

“Anyway, let’s get started. Alice is already capped, so we just have to level up Emily, Celeste, and Eve.”

“This bunny is capped, too.”

“Wow, really?”

I was surprised, but she *was* a famous adventurer before she’d joined us, so that made perfect sense. That meant we just had to raise Emily and Celeste. “Emily’s cap is 40 and Celeste’s is 54. Is that right?”

“Yep!” Emily answered promptly.

“You remembered...?”

For some reason, Celeste blushed.

Together, we stepped away from the carrots. After some waiting, they began turning into sleep slimes one after another.

I shot down each of the slimes as they popped, loaded the normal bullets they created, and continued the process. Just like yesterday, it was a perpetual motion machine that refilled just about as many bullets as I used.

Thus, I killed one after another without a care in the world and turned them into EXP.

“You’re something else, Yoda.”

“He’s got the farming pattern down pat... That’s the very picture of a first-rate adventurer!”

“Did I end up in a crazy strong guy’s party?”

While my friends chatted, I single-mindedly mass-produced EXP. The pile of carrots shrank over time, and their levels rose.

“I’ve reached my cap,” Emily announced.

“I’m up next, then.”

“We might not have enough at this rate...” Alice said.

“It doesn’t feel like enough, does it?”

“Alice, come with me,” Emily said. “We’ll head into town and buy more.”

Celeste warned her, “Emily, that might end up being expensive. I think you should farm them in the dungeon...”

“Yoda wants us to reach our level caps. If we farm them in the dungeon, we won’t make it back before he finishes this pile.”

“T-True...”

“I don’t mind if it’s expensive, as long as we can help Yoda.”

My friends were doing something behind me. I figured Emily must have been planning to make food for everyone again. She was like the family’s mom, so she kept an eye on what we needed and did a lot to help us out.

I left whatever that was to her as I mercilessly slaughtered outsiders for EXP. Along the way, I noticed regular slimes appearing among the sleep slimes, but I killed them regardless.

The sun set.

By the time it was around midnight, I had gotten Emily and Celeste to their level caps.

78. Unchanging Celeste

We traveled to the single status board positioned at Nihonium's entrance.

"Wanna go first, Emily?"

"Okay," Emily agreed and tapped through the status board with practiced motions.

The moment her stats appeared, she piped up, "Oooh! I've reached my level cap."

"As for your stats, they're...not bad, right? Your HP and strength were already at A, but your vitality is A now, too. Really optimal stats for a close-ranged fighter."

"Munch, munch... Now that's, munch...strong," Eve said while chowing down on the remaining carrots.

"It's rude to speak with your mouth full."

"..."

Eve ceased speaking. After chewing and fully swallowing the carrot, she took another in hand.

"You're going in for seconds?! Weren't you gonna finish talking?!"

"Even God may not interrupt a passionate tryst with carrots."

"Do you even know what you're saying?! Anyway, I agree that she's strong. Strong and sturdy; if she had some way of healing herself, she'd be able to deal with almost any situation."

"You're exaggerating." Emily blushed.

"Don't be humble. You've got A-rank HP, strength, *and* vitality. That's awesome. Right, everyone?"

Everyone agreed at once. Emily got even more embarrassed, so she tapped the status board again to divert attention away from her.

"Your drops have gone up a bit, too."

“They have. Okay, it’s Celeste’s turn.”

“Sure!” Celeste assented, took Emily’s place, and tapped the board with hopeful eyes.

“Wow! Your MP is A now!”

“Looks like you don’t have to worry about running out of MP anymore. You were at C before, right?”

“Now you can use lots of level 3 magic!”

While Emily and I were excited, Celeste remained silent.

“Is something wrong?” Alice asked, curious.

Celeste didn’t answer. Instead, she put a hand to her chest and took several deep breaths.

“Hah!”

Then, she flipped to the next page, to her drop stats.

“Ah...”

She froze in shock. Tears began to flow.

Yeah, I’m not surprised.

Celeste had always been self-conscious over the fact that she was a “Failure,” with F’s in all drop stats. Even at max level, her drop stats weren’t that good, but that didn’t matter to her. She lovingly traced her finger over the letter E on the status board.

Eventually, she turned to me. With tears streaming out of her eyes, she gave her biggest smile and said, “Thank you.”



B8 of Tellurium was an outdoorsy floor like B6 and B7. Unlike B7, however, it didn’t have dungeon snow falling all over.

We’d decided to try going to the next floor to celebrate Emily and Celeste capping their levels.

We ended up having to leave Eve on B2, though. I’d stopped

along the way to kill a bunch of sleep slimes, at which point her eyes had turned into carrots. She'd then declared that she would remain there. And so, only Emily, Celeste, Alice, and I traveled to B8 together.

What monsters awaited us there? Why, slimes that were silver like metal.

Seeing this as her time to shine, Celeste explained what they were.

"These are steel slimes. They're just as sturdy as they appear."

"I know," I replied. "I had to fight one of these when I got my license."

The Cyclo Dungeon Association had set up a licensing system to keep unprepared adventurers from stepping into the much more difficult B6.

Without a license, you couldn't sell drops from B6 onward even if you'd farmed them yourself. The main objective of adventurers was to farm monsters and make money, so these licenses were essential, making them as effective as barring entry. I'd fought a steel slime when I took my test for said license.

By the way, when I said "I know," Celeste looked a little let down.

Was she that excited to explain things? I feel kinda bad now.

"So they're just hard?" Emily asked. "They don't have any other special abilities?"

"Nope. They're just annoyingly hard."

"Okay. Yoda, I'll take care of this."

"Be my guest," I assented.

Emily hoisted her hammer and leaped forward. She then spun her hammer overhead and struck preemptively, slamming it down hard enough to crack the ground.

We watched the one-on-one battle between Emily and the steel

slime.

“It’s incredible that she can stand up to a steel slime with purely physical attacks!” Celeste piped up.

“Sometimes, you’ve just gotta raise your level and beat them with raw power.”

“True, but you can’t typically do that against steel slimes. The standard strategy is to find the weak point on their body and aim for that.”

“Wow. That’s actually not how I dealt with it.”

“How did you defeat it, Ryota?”

“I used freeze and flame rounds to cause a stress fracture, then just shattered it.”

“Stress...fracture?”

Celeste cocked her head in confusion. It seemed even this well-informed adventurer didn’t know.

While we talked, the battle approached its conclusion. Emily stood still and smashed the steel slime over and over with enough force to shake the dungeon. Whenever she lifted her hammer, the slime tried to jump, but she’d slam it right back down each time.

She lifted her hammer. The slime tried to move. She swung the hammer down.

She did this over and over, like she was pounding mochi.

“Look, Clunky’s starting to crack!” Alice exclaimed.

Clunky presumably referred to the steel slime. Did her naming it mean that she’d be able to recruit it like she had the two little guys sitting on her shoulders?

While I thought about that, Emily defeated the steel slime.

“Yoda, I did it!”

She ran back to us with a big, triumphant smile, not even stopping to pick up the melon her prey had dropped.



Back in Cyclo, we stepped inside a gaudy public office shaped like a vegetable and went straight downstairs. There, my friends looked around the underground room with great interest.

“It’s so big in here.”

“So this is where they make you fight monsters.”

“Boney and Bubbly, do you wanna play?”

By the way, we once again left Eve behind. I’d defeated a few sleep slimes on our way back through B2. When she picked up the carrots, she started rubbing them against her cheeks and said, “Now this bunny can die happy.”

I headed over to the counter and talked to the same man from last time.

“We’re here for the licensing exam.”

“For...B11 on?” he asked.

“Nope, B6. My friends still haven’t gotten theirs.”

“All three?”

“Just two, please.”

The man came from behind the counter and began preparing the exam.

I went back to my friends and announced, “I told him.”

“Thank you. Why are we doing this, though? Isn’t it enough for you to have a license?” Emily asked.

“It is, but I bet this will help if the need ever arises.”

Maybe I only believed that because, when I thought “license,” driver’s licenses were the first thing that came to mind. You only need one license for a person to drive a group of people around, but you could respond to an emergency easier if multiple people have them.

“It actually will.”

“How so?” I asked Celeste.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. Her reaction now was clearly different from when she didn’t get to explain the steel slimes earlier.

“People will see the family as stronger. The number of members with A-rank drops, how many and what kinds of licenses they have... All of that affects how people see us. If we’re strong and have lots of people with licenses, we’ll get more requests.”

“Come to think of it, the first thing I’d heard about the oh-so-great Neptune family was that they had five people with A-rank plant drops.”

“Exactly. As for us□” Celeste glanced at the man preparing the test in the distance. “We’ve kept your S-rank drops a secret, so I believe we should compensate where we can.”

The three of us agreed with Celeste.

Shortly thereafter, the man returned, having finished preparing, and asked, “...Who’s going first?”

“Emily... Oh?”

I looked at the item he’d set up in the distance to be turned into an outsider. It was a potato.

“It should be a melon, right? What, no steel slime this time?”

“We pick them at random...leaving out B7.”

“Why not B7?” Alice asked a fair question.

“A normal person can’t take down a guts slime on their own.”

“And using the slime’s tear would actually make it *too* easy for the test to be meaningful,” I added.

“That’s right.”

“...Your quota to pass is five or more kids,” the man muttered.

“The parent will be pretty sturdy, then. What’s the plan?” I asked as I looked at Emily and Celeste.

Potatoes were drops from B6 of Tellurium. They came from a monster called a slime family, which needed to be defeated in a particular way.

“I’ll take care of it,” Celeste declared.

“Think you can handle it?”

She nodded, pure confidence on her face.

“Okay, then it’s all yours.”

“Good luck!”

“Go, go, you’ve got this!”

Celeste nodded as we urged her on. She faced the potato for quite some time until it popped into an outsider. One large slime and dozens of smaller ones appeared, creating a single slime family.

“I’m sure Celeste can handle five!” Emily declared.

“For sure. She can take down five of them with her Bicorn Horns, then burn the main body to a crisp with Inferno.”

We were in full agreement. We knew just how strong Celeste was, so we were confident that she could beat the enemy and the quota.

A magic circle appeared at Celeste’s feet and her long, pretty hair fluttered from the power of her magic.

“Inferno!”

“Huh?” Emily and I gasped at once.

She betrayed our expectations and used her wide-range Inferno first. All of the child slimes burned away at once.

“She used Inferno right out the gate?!”

“That might make the parent too strong...”

Slime families had two unique traits. For each child defeated, the parent would drop more items when defeated. However, it would also grow stronger for each one. The kids were all gone now, bringing the parent to its theoretical strongest state.

Celeste didn’t hesitate to create another magic circle, but this one

was different.

“This is...the new power that Ryota helped me cultivate!” she murmured as she held her hand out. “Rip it apart... Silent Fury!”

Her supple fingers shot a laser-like light that was akin to condensed stage lighting. It struck the parent slime, slicing its body in half. The max-powered slime then disappeared with a pop.

“She did it! Ah!” I interrupted myself as Celeste wobbled in place. I ran over and caught her in my arms. “What’s wrong?”

“I just used too much mana with that new magic...” Celeste replied. Sweat formed on her brow, and her face turned as white as a sheet.

“Good grief... You haven’t changed since we first met.”

“No, I’ve changed... I’ve changed so much,” she stated as she gazed at me with gentle, yet passionate eyes. “Thank you. It’s all because of you.”

None of the thank-yous I’d heard so far had made my heart skip a beat quite like that one.

79. Triple Score

It'd been one night since Celeste and Emily obtained their licenses. We all gathered as a family in the warm, happy living room of Emily's creation.

While everyone enjoyed Emily's breakfast, she asked, "Yoda, do you have plans today?"

"Plans?" I replied as I cocked my head and thought to myself, looking up to the ceiling all the while. "Not especially—I'll just be farming in dungeons. Lots of stuff happened since the Harvest Festival, so it's about time I made some money."

Lots of stuff happened since the Harvest Festival. I met Alice, defeated the dungeon master of Nihonium, helped Margaret raise her level, got Emily and Celeste to their level caps, and took them to get their licenses.

Looking back, it might've been a full week or more since I'd gone farming. As a result, our main revenue stream had halted.

I wasn't a salaried worker anymore. Even if my company was corrupt, I still obtained hundreds of thousands of yen every month no matter what, but I didn't have that luxury now. My earnings this week were zero. That hadn't affected me—or us, rather—much yet, but I knew it was about time to rebuild our savings.

"Okay. I'll prepare to go to B8 of Tellurium," Emily said.

Celeste added, "This will be our first farming trip as a group in a while! I can't wait."

"It's my first time!" Alice added, joining in on the enthusiasm.

"I want carrots in my lunch," Eve stated as per usual.

Our breakfast was boisterous and fun. In the midst of it all, I thought for a while before proposing, "Can we act separately today, girls?"

“Are you busy today?”

“That’s not quite it. Everyone’s strong now—even though I know we’ve got plenty of room to grow.”

“Do we? But my level won’t go up anymore.”

“We do!” Celeste assured Emily. “Ryota’s magic fruits will let us learn two spells each, and we’re sure to get plenty of exciting equipment.”

“I can still hear monsters calling for me, too.”

“As long as there are new carrot frontiers to be found...”

Celeste and the others proved to Emily that we still had room to grow—though Eve’s evidence was iffy.

“That’s right, we can still grow stronger,” I declared. “But now that everyone’s capped, I want to see what we can do. How much money we can make in a week of farming.”

“I see!”

“That is important.”

Emily and Celeste agreed.

“Then I’ll go to B8 on my own,” Emily decided. “I can defeat steel slimes like I did the rocks in Arsenic.”

“Those are a lot slower than normal slimes because of their toughness, huh? Good idea.”

“Yoda, may I have a +1 drop-boosting potion?”

“Just one?”

“Yes. A +1 potion and the ring will get me to B, which should be a sufficient increase.”

She was right. I could make two kinds of drop-boosting potions. +3 potions came from paper money outsiders, while +1 potions came from coin outsiders.

One paper money outsider could be made from 1,000 piros, but coins went as low as 1 piro. As such, +1 potions were effectively free.

If her capped level and a +1 potion could get her to B, then she was right that it was better for farming.

“Got it. I’d like to find some +2 equipment so we can get you to A.”

“Agreed.”

“As for me...” Celeste thought for a moment. “Oh, I know. Alice, would you like to come with me?”

“Me? Sure, but... Oh, Boney and Bubbly!”

The chibi-sized monsters hid from Celeste.

“Ah...! Ahem... No, I’m being serious. I want their help to deal with the guts slimes on B7. With them, we could handle farming and fighting the occasional rare monster.”

“Really?”

“If Celeste says so, I believe her.”

“Okay. I’ll come.”

“Good,” Celeste answered calmly. However, I saw that fist pump under the table. Her ulterior motives were obvious, but I was sure it was fine.

“How about you, Eve?” I asked.

“Dust to dust, bunnies to carrots.”

“Have a +3 potion. Just make sure you count your total.”

“I’ve always had feelings for you!” Eve shouted incoherently, eyes wide.

With our plans set, we departed for our individual endeavors.



I decided to farm the floors where my friends weren’t going.

First stop: B1 of Tellurium. Slimes, of course.

I pushed the magic cart around with me. A slime appeared and

attacked, but I caught it in one hand. I then held it over the magic cart, readied my gun with the other, and

“Actually, no.”

I rethought this plan and instead crushed the slime in my hand. There was a squishy feeling as the slime disappeared, turned into bean sprouts, and fell into the cart. The slime felt weaker than they once had—hell, weaker than right before the Harvest Festival.

Was that thanks to my battle with Nihonium’s dungeon master? It was strong, normal attacks didn’t work on it, and it dealt a ton of damage when it attacked. A real tough enemy, all things considered. Compared to that, I could defeat slimes with one hand tied behind my back.

I pushed my magic cart onward, catching and crushing slimes as they jumped at me. When they didn’t attack, I’d walk toward them, pick them up, and then crush them over the cart.

I hummed to myself as I walked on like someone grocery shopping. Before long, the magic cart’s value-display function showed a perfect 40,000 piros.

With a cart full of bean sprouts, I went back to town and paid Swallow’s Returned Favor a visit. After that, back to the dungeon I went.

I’d planned to ignore B2...but Eve stopped me and forced me to pay a toll of one Ryota carrot.

B3 was home to cockro slimes. These slimes were gleaming, black monstrosities that scuttled along the ground. They were Emily’s natural enemy.

Earlier today, we’d had everyone protect Emily and escort her through the floor while she closed her eyes and covered her ears. Alice’s ability allowed us to predict where monsters would and wouldn’t be, so we took a detour to avoid letting Emily hear so much

as a footfall. That made the route even safer.

Cockro slimes dropped pumpkins. I wasn't very scared of them, so when one approached, I picked it up and tried to crush it.

Pop!

The cockro slime burst like popcorn and became a pumpkin in my hand. The sudden size increase made it too big to hold, which stung a little.

“So I take no damage from monsters, but that still stings, huh?”

It was kind of funny. Cockro slimes themselves weren't strong, but they would pop into pumpkins no matter how they were killed, which stung if I killed them with my bare hands. And so, I used normal bullets to farm them instead.

A mere four pumpkins came out to 42,000 piros, so I sold them at Swallow's Returned Favor.

About 80,000 piros so far. I went to the dungeon once more and paid my toll at the Eve checkpoint.

The B4 monsters were bat slimes. They flew around and hung from the ceiling like bats. Since they didn't approach sometimes, I shot them with regular bullets as soon as I spotted them. They dropped their items far away, so I equipped my pouch to suck them up and then put the drops in my cart.

With the triple combo of normal bullet, pouch, then cart, I continued farming. For B4 monsters, they were weak. I made it through without taking any damage and filled my cart.

It displayed 220,000 piros. This brought me to about 300,000 piros for the day so far.

Thanks to the gourmand, a single cartload of my branded Ryota Bamboo Shoots sold for a lot of money. But since they were branded, going overboard and flooding the market could've crashed the prices. Just one cartload was probably fine, however.

I went to sell them, paid my toll once more, and went to B5. There, I encountered a snake slime—a chain of several slimes connected together. I first used a Pandora's Box I'd brought and defeated one. The watermelon it dropped was sucked into the box, and my face was printed on it. This one would go to Ina's family's shop.

Once that was done, I defeated them normally. Snake slimes approached of their own volition, so I grabbed them after evading their attacks, then ripped them apart over the magic cart. Out popped a large watermelon, which I put into the cart.

I continued to push the cart forward as I farmed enemies. Snake slimes weren't very strong, so this was an easy trip. A cart full of them came out to 50,000 piros. Meanwhile, the one in the box was going to a special customer who would pay 50,000 piros for that one alone.

The same item varied so much in price just by displaying its manufacturer. It only worked once per day, but it was wonderful.

After farming the floors that my friends weren't on, I had earned 400,000 piros.

“Now, it's time to *really* get started.”

I left Swallow's Returned Favor and rolled up my sleeves. Now that I'd circled all of those floors, it was time for the good part.



That night, I waited for people to get back while the Emily-blessed living room healed my fatigue.

Once the last person, Eve, had returned, we began our reports.

“This bunny would have made about 120,000 piros today. New personal best.”

“A new personal best? Nice,” I complimented her.

“My vegetable drops were too low before.”

“That makes sense. You came to Cyclo even though meat is your best drop stat, after all.”

“What does ‘would have made’ mean?” Alice asked.

“I ate them all.”

“You ate 120,000 piros worth of carrots?!” I shouted.

How could I not shout? Piros and yen were about equal, so Eve had eaten 120,000 yen worth of carrots in one day.

“I made 160,000 piros,” Emily added, unfazed. “That’s a new record for me, too.”

“Good job, Emily. You beat Eve.”

“Only because Eve ate hers. If she had waited until the end before digging in, she would have won.”

“I can do double that,” the bunny stated confidently.

“You sure took your time eating, then.”

“Alice and I made 215,123 piros,” Celeste reported. That was Celeste for you; she was the only one to give a precise number.

“About 100,000 each, then,” I added.

With their reports done, everyone gazed at me. They must have been curious about my total. And so, I announced, “I made 1,560,000 piros.”

“Wowww!” everyone but Eve cheered.

“A week’s worth of carrots...” Eve mumbled, having done some odd mental math.

“That’s incredible, Yoda! You made more than all of us combined.”

“He tripled our score. Well done.”

“Ryota’s rich!”

My friends complimented me. That felt good.

“That means the whole family can make two million piros in one

day,” I said.

“Seems like it!”

“Which,” I added, “means we can splurge without worry.”

“Are we using it all right away?” Emily asked.

“We sure are,” I declared, then looked at everyone, from Emily to Alice. “It’s time to buy magic carts for everyone. I’ve been putting this off for far too long.”

After a short pause, everyone agreed with the proposal.

80. Family Function

We went to the magic cart shop Progress. This was where we'd bought the one we've been using as a family.

When we all stepped inside, the shopkeeper's son, Chuck, massaged his brow and sighed.

"Oh, old man..."

"Hi there," I greeted him.

"Welcome... Oh, you're that one guy."

"Ryota Sato. So you remember me, eh?"

"Yeah. You saved my bacon back then. How's the cart holding up?"

"It's fantastic. I can't thank you enough."

"Really? Well, thanks to you, we've gotten plenty of customers bringing in heavy rocks and light rocks who are asking to improve their carts the same way."

Heavy rocks and light rocks were monsters from Arsenic. This place had used its special traits to customize our magic cart to be able to show a calculated worth of the drops within. We occasionally showed that function off at Swallow's Returned Favor. And whenever asked, we would mention that we'd received it from Progress, making for a small advertising campaign.

"That's great," I replied.

"Excuse me? Why were you sighing?" Alice asked Chuck.

"Well, my old man's gone to a dungeon and hasn't returned."

"Again?"

"Has this happened before?" Alice asked, confused.

I explained, "We went through this already, yeah. He left another note saying he was gone, and he hasn't come back, right?"

Chuck nodded, a worried look coloring his visage.

“That’s right. He’s been gone for an entire week this time. It’s Arsenic, so I’m sure he’s not in danger, but...”

“Arsenic’s monsters never attack anyone, after all,” Celeste said, prompting agreement from Chuck, who then glanced at me.

So...he wants me to go.



That brought us to B17 of Arsenic.

“Aaargh, I’m tired of this!” I screamed the moment I saw another rock monster with a face on it.

Every floor from B1 to B17 had monsters that looked almost exactly the same. Sure, there were very minor differences in their faces and expressions based on the floor, but they were just that, minor. Plus, the rocks just stared at us, never attacking. It was totally fine for Cyclo, even the world at large, to have peaceful dungeons, but it was so boring that I was about to lose my mind.

Emily—who had come with me because she was a master of smashing Arsenic’s rocks—did her best to cheer me up.

“We must fight on! We’ve reached B17, so Orton should be here.”

“I know, but that doesn’t make me feel any better.”

“The rocks on this floor look sad, don’t they?”

“Now that you mention it, they do.”

I gazed into a rock’s face. Emily was right; the rocks littering this dungeon floor all looked miserable. Those were the faces of salaried workers on the last train home, exhausted from work. Honestly, I hated looking at them.

“Now...where’s Orton, you think?” I asked.

“Let’s take a look around.”

“All right. By the way, I don’t see any adventurers on this floor. There were plenty of people up above, though. It’s wild how 90% of them were using Emily Hammers, right?”

“Urk... That name is so embarrassing.”

“Seems like it makes for good advertising. Maybe he should look into paying you a commission fee,” I teased.

Back when Emily’s hammer had broken, a weapons dealer named Smith had come and offered a free replacement. That was the Emily Hammer. She had a sponsor who made gear for her, just like a pro athlete. The better she performed, the more that people who looked up to her would want to buy the same gear.

Emily had received a new hammer through him, and now, nine out of ten of the adventurers in Arsenic used the same hammer.

“The hammer is very easy to use,” she protested. “I don’t think it’s all because of me.”

“Someone was waiting on B1 to ask for your autograph. You’re famous, Emily.”

“Please forget that happened!” Emily screamed, blushing.

Incidentally, the one who had asked for her signature was a young woman holding an Emily Hammer. She’d said that she admired Emily, so she wanted the hammer itself signed.

The eighteen-year-old girl had a much more normal body type than Emily, but she could barely lift the hammer. Perhaps that was why she admired her.

I teased Emily over it until we found Orton. He was a short and stout middle-aged man with a fine beard. Just like last time, the word “dwarf” came to mind.

“Orton,” I called out.

“Hmm? Oh, it’s you.”

“Chuck’s worried sick.”

“Kid lacks gumption. I left him a note saying I’d be here in Arsenic.”

“A week is just too long.”

“Well, too bad!” he shouted. “I haven’t gotten my drop yet.”

“What drop?”

“I need the rare monster of this floor, the master rock. Say, how about you help me get it? Once I’ve got it, I’ll make your cart extra good.”

“Sure, we can do that.”

“Okay.”

Emily and I agreed to his proposal. We’d come here planning to help him, anyway. Sure, we came due to Chuck’s concerns, but we knew Orton was the kind of guy who devoted his life to improving magic carts. He’d even go as far as making his family worry as a result.

I was curious what kind of thing he’d wanted to make if it inspired him to hole up in here for an entire week.

“So we just have to find the master rock, right?” I asked.

“No need to find it. Just touch one of those slave rocks.”

“Why?”

“Touch it and you’ll understand.”

Orton left it at that.

Emily and I looked at each other and nodded. We then approached the closest slave rock and touched it. The rock with the face of a corporate slave did nothing.

“Nothing’s happening.”

“That just means it ain’t here yet. You’ll know, trust me.”

“Uh, okay...”

We trusted Orton and took turns touching the rock for ten seconds at a time. This dungeon was so darn boring and plain that I

was about to lose my mind.

But then, while Emily was touching the rock, she disappeared!

“Emily?!”

“It’s here!” Orton piped up and touched another rock. When he did, he disappeared as well.

I didn’t know what was going on, but I couldn’t just sit by and do nothing, so I placed one hand on a rock and another on my gun. A second later, I found myself somewhere else.

“Yoda!”

“Emily, are you okay?”

“I am. More importantly, there it is,” Emily replied as she pointed past me. When I turned to get a better look, I spotted a monster with a clearly different face.

If the rocks on B17 were exhausted corporate slaves, then this one was a rich guy at a cabaret club with girls all around him. It seemed that touching the slave rocks warped you to where the master rock waited.

“That’s the master rock,” Orton stated.

“All we have to do is defeat it?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Here goes!”

Emily didn’t even wait for him to finish his sentence. She whipped out a red potion, drank it, and spun her Emily Hammer around as she jumped to strike.

I watched and waited. I figured she could handle it just fine; she was strong enough to have fans, was in a dungeon she could call her second home, and had A-rank drops thanks to her red potion.

However, the moment she swung her hammer down on it, she disappeared.

“Emily?!”

“Don’t worry. She just got warped out of the dungeon.”

“She’s outside the dungeon?”

Orton explained, “If you don’t kill the master rock in one hit, you get sent outside of the dungeon. It’s a real pain in the butt.”

“But you’re only taken outside?”

“Yeah.”

Then I didn’t have to worry about Emily.

“One hit is all you get, huh?” I mumbled.

“Think you can do it?”

“I’ll try.”

I took my guns out and ran through scenarios in my mind, trying to figure out how I could maximize my firepower with one attack. After much thought, I put five buffing rounds and a flame round in one gun. The other got five buffing rounds and a freeze round. Then, I fired.

The flame and freeze rounds collided midair and fused. The resulting annihilation round, powered up by ten buffing rounds, eliminated an area that was 16 feet wide!

Of course, the master rock disappeared without a trace.

The full-powered annihilation round’s effects were jaw-dropping.

“Buddy... Don’t you think you went a little far?”

Even Orton, the one who’d told me to kill it in one blow, was astounded.



We left the dungeon and turned the flowers that had dropped into slave rock and master rock outsiders. Arsenic’s monsters were special; they didn’t attack even inside their home dungeon, so they were harmless as outsiders. Orton put them into special boxes he’d

developed, and then we hauled them back to Progress.

After shaking off Chuck's concern for him, he went into his workshop.

"Geez... Annoying old man."

Despite his annoyance, Chuck was clearly relieved.

I waited with my friends until Orton emerged with a magic cart and a big box. The cart was the one we'd been using to this point. As for the box... Well, it was just a big, open box.

"All done, fellas!" he announced.

"What did you do?" Emily asked.

"Come over and let me tell you something," Orton said before whispering something into her ear.

"Got it. Yoda, I'll be heading out."

"Emily? Wait□"

Before I could stop her, she ran out of the shop with the magic cart.

"What's going on?"

"Heh, just watch," Orton chuckled as he turned to the box.

He'd said "just watch," but the man himself seemed hopeful, too. Before long, there was a *plunk* as bean sprouts flew from the box.

"There it is! Aww, yeah, another win for Orton!"

"Bean sprouts? I don't understand."

"This new feature lets you send the contents of your magic cart to this box, no matter where you are. Put it in your base in the city or a warehouse, and you won't have to come back every time your cart's full."

"Whoa! That's really convenient!"

Work had gotten a lot easier with the magic cart, but now, going back and forth from the dungeon had become a hassle. With this function, we'd only have to visit the shop once a day.

"Because of you, I've got another success under my belt. Thanks,

bud.”

“Could you use this with multiple carts?” I asked.

“Of course! It’s made with that expectation in mind, so it can link up to multiple slave blocks. Why, how many do you need?”

“Including me, five.”

“Leave it to me! Hehehe, more users makes it more worthwhile to put together.”

Orton excitedly returned to his workshop. His son, Chuck, shook his head in exasperation. Thanks to the old man’s hard work, we received multiple magic carts with the new function installed.

81. Erza for Loan

The first floor of our home was a magic cart garage. I closed the door and spoke to Celeste and Alice, who were currently waiting in the enclosed space with me.

“Watch this,” I said as I placed a normal bullet in my own magic cart and pressed the second button on it.

Plunk!

The same bullet popped out of the box I’d left at a distance from us.

“It warped over there!” Celeste gasped.

“Wowww! Can you send anything with this?”

“Anything that fits in the magic cart, yeah.”

“Boney!” Alice called out. With a rattle, the chibi skeleton nodded and jumped into the magic cart. Alice then excitedly pressed the button and watched as Boney hopped right out of the box. “Wow, that’s so cool!”

“The feature isn’t made for that. Basically...”

Just as I started to speak, something else jumped out of the box. It was a pile of dandelions. Emily had sent them here from Arsenic. But there were a whole lot of them, so the box got filled up right away.

“As you can see, the feature lets you keep on farming without needing to head back into town when your cart is full.”

“That’s so convenient,” Celeste commented. “I bet you could make even more money now, Ryota.”

“Why just me?”

“Because you’re the only one with S-rank drops,” Celeste said. My friends were the only ones living here, so she didn’t hesitate. “It’s easier for me to farm without having to go back to town, too, but my

earnings would only go up a little. I have to worry about MP, after all.”

“Oh... Makes sense. That does make a huge difference for mages.”

Just like in video games, MP-consuming mages were pretty inconvenient for farming. Farming also depleted *everyone's* stamina over time, mage or not, but that was nothing compared to MP consumption.

That was especially true of Celeste, since her wide-range magic burned through MP. She was suffering the most out of all of us.

“But I’m certain your earnings will shoot through the roof. Maybe they’ll even double compared to before...”

“Double, huh? I’ll have to give it a try.”

Whenever I obtained a new power or piece of equipment, I tested how they contributed. The magic cart’s item-warping ability was huge, so I had to take it for a spin.

“Whoa, whoa! Ryota, they keep coming!” Alice exclaimed, beginning to get flustered. More drops were being sent through the box. It wasn’t just dandelions this time, either, but carrots as well. And on top of that...

“She wrote ‘Bunny’s Carrots’ on them,” Celeste said.

“We already know that! I wouldn’t dream of touching those carrots!”

That was one easy way to incur the dragon-bunny’s wrath. I wouldn’t touch them even if she begged me to.

“But it really is convenient.”

“Sure is.”

“Hey, Ryota? Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“How are you planning to take all this stuff to sell it?”

“...Oh.”

The mountain of carrots, the second set of dandelions popping out... This was a problem I had not considered.



At the ever-familiar Swallow's Returned Favor, I explained the situation to Erza in the meeting space.

"So basically, that's our problem."

"Another new magic cart from Orton? Goodness..."

"I like how convenient it is, but I hadn't thought of how to carry the stuff here once we've gathered everything. It's all mixed together from multiple magic carts, so it might be harder to bring here as-is."

"That is a problem," Erza agreed. "I understand that a day of drops for you can become difficult to manage. Your record so far is sixteen trips in one day."

"I'm amazed you remember that."

I knew it was more than ten, but I hadn't counted that far. When she mentioned it, her friend Ina, who happened to be passing by, smirked and said, "Of course she remembers. It's you, after all."

"Ina!"

"Hahahaha! You're not slick. Whenever you figure out Sato's coming multiple times a day, you get all nervous."

"No I don't! Just get back to work, Ina!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Erza chased off her friend, but she was still blushing.

"A-Anyway...you expect to continue working with our shop, yes?"

"Yeah. You've always taken care of me, so I see no reason to work with anyone else."

This place had always treated me well, so I wanted to remain

loyal to them. That was why I'd come to her in the first place.

Understanding that, Erza silently nodded, stood up, and said, "Hold on just a moment. I'll speak with my manager."

"Thanks."

Erza walked into the back of the shop, so I sat and waited.

Swallow's Returned Favor was as packed as ever. There weren't any problems with drops or magic storms, so the adventurers who'd splurged at the Harvest Festival were bringing in drops to make money.

"Thank you for waiting," Erza said as she returned. When I turned to her, I noticed that a man was with her. He was a pretty plain guy in his thirties, but for some reason, he had a bird's nest on his head. A navy blue bird poked out of the nest; it was a swallow.

The man has a swallow's nest on his head! Okay, don't comment. Maybe it's a fashion choice, or maybe it's a pet. No, he could be planning to eat it. Also, wouldn't it suck if it craps in it?

Questions flooded my mind, but I resisted the urge to say something.

If you see a weirdo and you try to understand them, you've already lost.

"Allow me to introduce you," Erza said. "This is the owner of our establishment and his wife."

"Did you say wife?!"

"Sorry you had to see this. Long ago, I pried into her darkest secrets. That ticked her off, so now she only appears as a human for me once a month on the night of the full moon."

"You pried when she specifically didn't want you to?! I'm amazed she didn't leave you."

The owner laughed and sat across from me. He was moving normally, but the nest didn't budge; some odd balance was keeping it

in place atop his head. Though, it was sliding a tiny bit, so it wasn't fixed in place. How weird.

Don't say anything... You'll never get to talk business if you do.

While I practiced self-restraint, the man introduced himself.

"I'm the owner here, Will Dakker. Pleasure to meet you."

"Y-Yeah... Pleasure to meet you."

"You've done a lot of good for us. Thanks to the items you've been bringing in as of late, our reputation has shot through the roof. Our market share is rising, too. We truly appreciate you."

After a moment's pause, Will got down to business.

"Erza told me about your predicament. I have a proposal... What if we were to loan you Erza?"

"Whaaat?!" she yelled. For some reason, she was surprised. Had he not said that he would suggest this? "S-S-S-Sir! What are you saying?!"

"Do you not want to go? I suppose I could ask Ina instead."

Apparently having heard him, Ina raised her hand and called out with a smile, "Suuure, I don't mind!"

"I-I didn't say I wouldn't go!"

"Then there's no problem, right?"

"Umm... You say loan, but what exactly does that entail?" I asked.

"We'd like to dispatch Erza to the legendary Ryota family's warehouse. She will tabulate the total to be bought, and once per day—or twice, depending on how things go—we'll go to recover the goods. That's my current idea."

"I see."

I ran through the scenario in my mind. It sounded like a good idea. That way, we would spend basically no time coming to Swallow's Returned Favor, and I didn't mind leaving it to Erza, since I

trusted her.

Honestly, the proposal sounded too good to be true for us.

“Are you sure, though?” I asked them.

“We typically don’t do things like this, but I’d like to keep your business for a long time, so I’m willing to make an exception.”

“An exception?”

“Yep. Only for you, Mr. Sato,” Will stated as he looked into my eyes, as if to say, *How about it?*

I appreciated the offer. And when I ran through the scenario again, I saw no reason to refuse.

“Let’s do it.”

“I’m glad we’ve reached an agreement.”

Will got up and offered his hand, so I stood and returned the handshake.

Thus, Erza was loaned out to us.

82. Hundred-Millionaire

This morning was a pretty normal one. I went down to B5 of Nihonium. In the cavern covered by dungeon snow, I fought a red skeleton.

As they were bolstered by the dungeon's mana, the red skeletons were fast. They attacked at three times the speed of normal skeletons. They came in groups, too. As three red skeletons charged at me, I fired normal bullets at blinding speed.

Two of them shattered into piles of bones, but one made it through my bullet hail. It closed in on me in an instant, kicked me in the stomach, then backed off.

Hit-and-run tactics? Pretty impressive for a monster...

“They can move even faster?!”

It had kicked me and retreated—ahead of me, specifically—but then it circled around me again, going even faster this time. When I felt something coming, I jumped to the side. The red skeleton's leg whistled through the air.

Red skeletons began taking in dungeon snow when they sensed a person. If you didn't defeat them right away, they'd gradually grow faster thanks to it.

Bang!

I fired a normal bullet, but I couldn't hit it anymore; it had evaded with its incredible mobility.

Rattle, rattle, rattle...

After dodging my bullet, its jaw began to rattle. It was as if it was laughing—laughing at me.

“...”

As the red skeleton closed in even faster, I stowed my guns. It

swiveled around to try to get behind me.

“Nice try!”

However, I predicted this, got serious, and circled back around it. My S-rank speed wasn’t just for show. I was just as fast as the skeleton.

The moment it moved, I circled around where it would land after it circled around me. I didn’t attack; I just moved around and nudged it to see if my attacks would land. Then, when it moved, I caught up and nudged it again.

We repeated this process for about five minutes. The red skeleton was faster than me now. I couldn’t circle around it, and my attacks didn’t land.

“So it takes five minutes for them to get faster than S-rank speed, eh?”

I’d just tested this out of random curiosity. As a result, I concluded that it took five minutes for them to outspeed me.

Best remember that.

I took out my guns, filled them up with buffing rounds, and loaded homing rounds.

They followed the red skeleton. It was so fast that it made afterimages now, so it evaded the bullets with ease. However, they changed direction and struck it in the back. After taking those two shots, the skeleton fell to pieces and dropped a seed.

I picked it up and raised my MP.

My morning went on like that, full of stat-boosting and testing, until my neglected MP went from E to D.



That afternoon, I was a nervous wreck. I defeated slimes on B1 of

Tellurium to create bean sprouts.

Instead of using my guns, I pushed the magic cart and caught slimes when they jumped at me. I then crushed them and continued on my way. This was the grocery store cart-pushing style I'd developed a few days ago.

Once the cart was full of bean sprouts, I pressed the warp button instead of leaving.

Plunk!

The cart was empty once more.

I then killed more slimes and received more bean sprouts. Before long, the cart was full again, so I sent the contents to our home where Erza waited.

Each time I sent a cartload, I got nervous. I hadn't counted the value; I'd avoided doing so on purpose. Along the way, I started sending stuff before the cart was even full.

I didn't stop at bean sprouts, either; I also went down to B3 and farmed pumpkins. Then, I went to B4 for bamboo shoots and B5 for watermelons. As a result, it was impossible to estimate the sum.

I grew even more nervous. I'd planned to go with the "wait until the very end and then learn the total all at once" strategy, but along the way, I started to get all fidgety and excited.

A few times, I'd wondered if I should go back for a progress report, but I managed to keep my cool and continue farming.

And so, I farmed nonstop without ever leaving the dungeon, despite my constant nervousness.



That evening, I returned to our three-story home and found Emily and Celeste already there.

“Welcome home.”

“Welcome back.”

“Thanks, girls. Still counting the total?”

At a hastily set up desk in the first-floor garage, Erza scribbled on a piece of paper with her pen. I noticed a bunch of numbers on it. She must have been counting today’s total.

“How’d you guys do?” I asked.

“I dunno,” Celeste answered. “I asked her to give us a complete total after you returned.”

“This is our first time working in the new setup, so I want to be surprised, too,” Emily added.

“Agreed. I ended up losing focus along the way because I was so anxious. Honestly, I might’ve been inefficient today.”

“I know how you feel,” Emily replied, expressing her agreement.

My efficiency would increase from tomorrow on because I wouldn’t be as anxious, that much was for sure. Or at least, that was what I believed.

Eventually, Erza put down her pen and looked up at us.

“Sorry for the trouble. Is it done?”

“Yes. Your total for the day is□”

“Oh, sorry. Could you give us our individual totals first?”

“Huh? Um, okay. Celeste made 156,551 piros.”

“You made about 100,000 before, right?”

“What a surprise... That’s a an enormous boost.”

Even she couldn’t believe her own earnings.

“Next, Emily. You made 273,972 piros.”

“Whaaat?! A-Are you sure that’s correct?”

“Yes, I’m certain,” Erza confirmed.

“Good work, Emily.”

“I-It’s all thanks to you, Yoda.”

“No, I mean, 270,000 piro is a major milestone.”

“What do you mean?”

“I calculated this a while back. If you make 270,000 piro per day, you’d have almost a hundred million in a year.”

“Whaaat?!” Emily exclaimed.

“A hundred million... That’s unbelievable,” Celeste murmured, impressed.

Of course, we had more stuff to do than head into dungeons every single day, but 270,000 in a day was still a striking feat.

“Congratulations, Emily. You’re effectively a hundred-millionaire.”

“No... It’s all because of you, Yoda.”

Emily blushed and gave us a bashful smile. She looked happy as she deserved to be.

“Well...guess I’m last, huh?”

I got nervous again as I watched Erza and waited for her report. A drumroll began in my brain, and my heart pounded faster.

“Ryota, you made 2,999,808 piro!” she declared.

“Whoa! Oh? Uhhh...so not three mil, huh?”

There was a flood of different emotions: the joy of a new record and the disappointment of not going all the way and hitting three million dominated my mind. However, my friends disagreed.

“That’s amazing,” Celeste said. “But it’s no surprise coming from Ryota.”

“Huh?”

“That’d work out to a billion per year!”

“Oooh.”

I’d reacted in shock to the milestone that was a hundred million, but a billion was so big that I didn’t even know what to say.

A billion per year, huh? That’s a huge deal.

83. The City-Devouring Dungeon

That night, we had a feast in the second-floor living room. All kinds of foods littered the table. It was as grand as a hotel buffet, and it had all been cooked by Emily.

The Ryota family, plus Erza, sat around it. As the only outsider, she hesitated while a drink was poured into her cup.

“Are you sure it’s fine if I join you?”

“The more, the merrier,” Emily replied. “I used to serve feasts like these in dungeons. My mother loved them, so she would always find excuses to throw impromptu parties.”

“What an energetic mother.”

“She spent a whole year in her favorite dungeon. It dropped wine.”

“That tells you everything you need to know about Emily’s mom, huh?” I chuckled.

“She’s a lot like Eve!” Alice said as she hugged the bunny in question.

Eve looked a little annoyed to have her rodent-like gnawing on a carrot interrupted, but she accepted the hug...because Alice had brought her another carrot.

Our party to celebrate Emily’s accomplishment was in full swing, and she remained busy throughout it.

“Ryota, look at this!” Celeste called out to me. I turned around, curious; she was showing me her cupped hands. Alice’s friends, Boney and Bubbly, were resting within. She also held plushies that looked just like the duo. They were chibi-style just like the real ones, and they looked to be made from fabric.

The monsters themselves rattled and squished against the

plushies, seeming quite interested.

“They didn’t run away! I even get to hold them!” she said proudly.

“Good for you, Celeste. By the way, what’s with the plushies?”

“I made them.”

“You did? Wow... They’re so well-made that I wouldn’t be surprised to see them as prizes in a crane game.”

“So cuuute...”

Celeste’s eyes turned into hearts as she stared, engrossed, at Boney and Bubbly. Days ago, they would have run away if she approached them, so this was incredible progress. I was glad that her love was requited now.

“That’s so cool,” I said. “I knew you liked plushies, but I didn’t know you could make them that fast. And they’re adorable, too.”

“Celeste is great at it! You should see her Yoda□”

“Aaah, shut up, shut up, shut up!”

For some reason, Celeste screamed and cut Emily off.

I think I heard my name in there. What’s up?

“Ah...” Celeste groaned, looking dejected. Boney and Bubbly had gotten startled by her yelling and ran away. They jumped out of her hands and began bouncing and rattling on the table until they’d retreated into Alice’s clothes.

“Ah...”

She was heartbroken. Her hands reached for the monsters, but they only clutched sorrow. It seemed her love would be unrequited again.

Thus, our feast continued. The greatest food, the greatest mood... We all had a fun time.

When I sat by the wall to take a break from all the commotion, Erza approached me.

“Good work today,” she said.

“You too. It must have been hard to deal with all the stuff we sent.”

“It’s no problem; that’s my job, after all. But it is amazing...”

“What is?”

“Your whole family. Everyone is so strong, but they also live in such happy harmony. I’m especially amazed that the Killer Rabbit herself fits perfectly in your group.”

“If it’s because of anyone, it’s Emily. Did you feel it when you came in here? Her warmth and cheerfulness are like magic.”

“...I think she’s just a normal person, though.”

“Normal?” I asked as I cocked my head at Erza, unsure what she meant by that.

“She’s not a saint or a god; she’s human. A normal human could never make such warmth and joy for someone they didn’t love.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“I think that this house is a mirror that reflects the person who earned Emily’s love,” Erza stated as she gazed back at me.

The person who earned Emily’s love...? Does she mean me?

She continued, “In my opinion, Ryota, you’re the one who deserves all the praise.”

“Maybe...”

“And I’m happy to be able to work with you. I’m only on loan, but I hope you’ll consider me part of the group.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Erza and I exchanged a firm handshake.

Our fun, lively party went on deep into the night.



The next day, while I was on my way to Nihonium, Clint summoned me. I'd hoped to get to him after I was done with my daily routine, but it was an emergency, so I put my errands on hold and went to the Dungeon Association.

I knocked on the door. When I entered, I found Clint taking medicine. There was a pile of white powder atop a thin slip of paper. Clint funneled it all into his mouth and swallowed it without water.

Was it stomach medicine, perhaps? Either way, I was amazed that he could take it without water.

While I mused inwardly, I asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. This helped me pep up a bit."

"Pep up? Uh...you're not taking weird drugs, are you?"

"Don't worry. It's just white sugar."

"That isn't medicine!"

"When I take it, I feel way better."

"That's just weird!"

This guy was going to get diabetes at some point.

I guess I'll just have to hear him out for now, I thought to myself as I sat on the couch with him.

"So, a new dungeon has appeared," Clint began.

"Uh-huh."

This again?

Two dungeons had already appeared since I'd come to this world: Nihonium and Selenium. It didn't happen often, but it didn't seem like a rare occurrence, either. There wasn't much I could offer him other than a token "Okay, and?" in this situation. However, Clint looked grave. So grave, in fact, that he opened the box on his table and plucked a single sugar cube—one that you'd typically put into a drink—and tossed it into his mouth.

"It's in a village that has never had a dungeon before. That alone

is fine, but the dungeon has swallowed up half of the village.”

“It swallowed the village?”

“This happens sometimes. A dungeon appears right under a village or city, and it swallows it...or maybe it'd be more accurate to say that it incorporates it.”

“That sounds...bad.”

I couldn't imagine what it looked like, but I had an idea of how dire the situation was.

“Due to how sudden it was, villagers were swallowed as well. Several rescue parties have been sent, but annoyingly, this one happens to be a rogue dungeon.”

“A rogue dungeon?”

“Rogue dungeons change their form every single time someone enters them. That makes it difficult to rescue people.”

“So you could get lost in it forever...” I muttered.

Clint kept his eyes fixed on me as he said, “Our only choice is to send our strongest people in. Please, we need you to go to this new dungeon and save the villagers. You're their only hope!”

He put his hands on the table and leaned forward. The man looked ready to get on his hands and knees to beg.

“I'll do it.”

“Really?! Thank you! Thank you so much!”

More desperate than usual, Clint thanked me over and over and gave me a map.

With that, I left the Dungeon Association building.

A new dungeon devouring a village, huh? We'd better head there soon before things get worse.

84. Demons and a Caring Father

I went home and told my friends everything. In our warm and happy living room, everyone gathered with grave looks on their faces.

“What is the name of the village?” Celeste asked.

“Uh, according to the map, it’s...Indole.”

“Huuuh?!” Alice yelled.

“What’s the matter, Alice?”

“That’s my village. Are you sure it’s Indole?”

“Yeah. This one here, right?”

A little hesitant, I showed Alice the map Clint had given me. She snatched it away and answered immediately, “Yeah! That’s the one, Indole. I can’t believe it’s this bad now...”

“Th-This is awful...” Emily mumbled, horrified.

“Ryota! I’m going, too. Take me with you!”

“Okay, let’s go. I’d like to take one more person, though.”

“Why do we need just one more?” Celeste asked, confused.
“Wouldn’t we be more likely to succeed if everyone went?”

“Well, Clint says it’s a rogue dungeon that changes its layout every single time someone goes in. Even if we go as a group, we can’t send everyone in at once; after all, the shifting layout might put the people inside in danger.”

“I see...”

“That’s why you only want one more...”

While I wondered what to do, an unexpected person raised her hand.

“This bunny will go.”

It was Eve, with the sexy bunny suit and natural rabbit ears. I was surprised that she’d volunteer for something that had nothing to do

with carrots.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, appearing silent yet firm in her decision.

Thus, it was decided that Eve, Alice, and I would travel to Indole together.



Indole was a plain village nestled between the base of a mountain and a river. Compared to Cyclo, the buildings were simple. It was the ruralest of the rural. However, it wasn't a farming community; there was no livestock, and there were no farming implements. You had to wonder how they made a living out here. Now wasn't the time to think about that, though.

When we arrived at the village, we heard a commotion.

“Is something happening?” I asked.

“I can hear them from here!” Alice exclaimed as she ran off ahead of us. Eve and I rushed to catch up to her.

After we passed a few homes, we saw the dungeon entrance in an open area. Normally, these entrances would be on the outskirts of town, but this was smack-dab in the middle of the village.

There was an unnatural lack of any structures nearby. Even the plainest villages had traces of people living and traveling through them, but there were no such signs here. It was as if someone had taken a giant eraser to the area around the entrance. Unnatural, indeed.

Villagers had gathered there, clamoring as they watched the dungeon entrance. Alice ran over to them and asked a villager, “Everyone, what’s going on?!”

“Alice, hey there! When did you get back?”

“I heard a dungeon swallowed the village, so I came back. Did anything else happen?”

“Yeah. One of the people stuck in the dungeon came out to seek help,” the villager answered.

I noticed a villager in tattered clothes off in the distance. He was being treated while he explained the situation inside the dungeon to the other villagers.

“Oh... So he made it out,” Alice murmured.

“Yeah, but Rick, the person who tried to escape with them, ended up getting separated along the way.”

“Separated?”

“It happened right in front of the entrance.”

“So Rick’s still inside?” she asked.

The man nodded. Alice was at a loss for words...and I had a bad feeling about this.

Meanwhile, the villagers started to shout.

“Someone’s coming out!”

“It’s Rick! That’s Rick over there!”

“He’s collapsed inside!”

I looked over at the dungeon entrance. A young man was just inside. He was in even worse shape than the guy who’d escaped first. He reached his trembling hands out. Though he was wounded, he was alive.

“Rick!” an elderly man called out to him. He appeared to be Rick’s father.

He desperately ran toward him. That was the natural reaction for a father seeing his son had survived danger, but...

“Wait! Somebody stop him!” I shouted.

The villagers were stunned for a moment, but they all ran at once to stop him. Unfortunately, that moment’s hesitation was all it took.

The man went into the dungeon and disappeared.

“Too late...” I sighed. Everyone else looked disappointed as well.

This rogue dungeon changed form every single time someone entered it. Even if someone was right before your eyes, trying to go in and save them was the worst thing you could do.



While villagers were still crowding around the entrance, I said to Eve and Alice, “I’m going in.”

“You’re going in alone, Ryota?” Alice asked.

“You saw that, didn’t you? Going in as a group wouldn’t do anything. In fact, we might just change the dungeon more, increasing the likelihood of danger.”

“I-I guess...”

“What do we do?” Eve asked me.

“Keep the entrance sealed. I wouldn’t be surprised if a villager tried to run in every time someone came out. You’d think they would learn from that demonstration, but emotion might drive them to mess up.”

“Okay! We’ll stop them!” Alice declared, wringing her hands all the while.

“By force,” Eve added while chopping through the air.

I left this place to my reliable friends and entered the dungeon.

In an instant, everything around me changed. The dungeon was like an underground passage with stone pavement. I now stood in the middle of a path. I looked forward and looked back, but the path extended both ways. The entrance I’d just come through was nowhere to be found.

What a pain. This dungeon isn’t the kind of place for adventurers to

flood into and farm. Wow, I'm really starting to get this world, huh? I thought to myself as I loaded every different kind of round in my guns. Ready for any situation, I pressed onward.

A monster appeared right away. It was a small monster— even smaller than Emily. But it didn't have the body of a child. In fact, its face resembled that of a sneering adult, and it had horns and sharp fangs. Thanks to the bat-like wings on its back, it could even fly. It seemed to be a small demon-like monster.

What do they call monsters like this in this world? I wondered as I readied my guns. However, the monster ran away.

Surprised, I just stood there, holding out my guns. That might've been my first time having a monster just run away as soon as it saw me.

“Maybe it's just that kind of mon—”

Kapow!

There was a sudden impact on the back of my head. It surprised me so much that I stumbled, but I managed to keep my footing and whipped around.

The same monster was there. It must have slipped around me and attacked from behind. Now that its fake retreat had worked in its favor, it sneered even more than before. Then, it ran away again.

“You're not getting away this time!”

With my S-rank speed, I circled around it. There was a shocked look on the monster's face as I pulled the trigger.

The counterattack pierced a wing. With one of its wings torn, it was no longer steady in the air.

Time to finish it off.

“Gngaaah!” a man screamed. That was a familiar voice; it belonged to the elderly man who'd run in to save his son.

I abandoned the monster and ran toward the source of the

scream. After dashing through the passage for a while, I arrived at a more open area. The man and his son were there alongside some monsters. His son had collapsed on the ground. His breathing was faint. One demon-like monster had its claws against his neck. There was another that tortured the father, who was unable to do anything while his son was held hostage.

“Gah... Graaah!” The father could not defy them. He could only stare in desperation at his fallen son.

The two demons cackled at him.

My blood ran cold at the sight. I was even more furious than when one had ambushed me before. I took a deep breath and charged forward. First, I seized the head of the one that had taken the young man hostage. Then, I kept going and grabbed the other one, who was still cackling and torturing the old man.

The two monsters were confused as I slammed them into the wall and pushed them deeper into it.

Creeeak... Crack!

I felt their heads flatten against the wall. When I let go, the now-headless demons fell to the ground.

“Rick...”

The father had no stamina left to stand, so he just crawled toward his son. The son was wounded as well, but honestly, his father looked worse off to me.

Both of them were in real danger, but I could fix that. I reloaded my guns with five buffing rounds and one recovery round each. Then, with the most powerful healing setup possible, I fired a bullet into each of them.

White light enveloped them.

“Rick! Rick, are you okay?” the father called out.

“Dad? Why are you here?”

A desperate father, a stunned son. I'd managed to save them both for now.

85. Rescue 'Em All

“Thank you... Thank you so much! I don’t know how we can ever express our gratitude.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The father, Alan, and his son, Rick, both thanked me.

“No problem. How’s the swallowed village doing?” I asked Rick, hoping that he’d know, since he’d come from the inside.

Unfortunately, he furrowed his brow and answered, “We don’t know.”

“You don’t?”

“At first, everyone was together inside the dungeon. But after it changed form a few times, whole homes got separated from us.”

“Whole homes? What’s that mean?”

“Our homes moved all over the dungeon. When it changed shape the third time, the house next to ours disappeared.”

“The May family, you mean?” Alan asked.

Rick nodded and replied, “I didn’t know what to do, but in the end, I was warped to a place where I saw light coming in and heard voices. I tried to escape, but there was a monster there that got me before I made it out. That was why I collapsed in front of the entrance.”

“I see.”

Based on the look of the dungeon entrance, there must have been at least ten homes swallowed by this dungeon.

I’d expected them all to be in the same place, but based on what he’d just said, the flow of people in and out had shuffled them all into random places throughout the dungeon.

Things might be worse than I thought.



I escorted Alan and Rick out of the dungeon. Three of those little demons had appeared along the way, but I dispatched them all with little thought. We'd gotten lost a few times□it was our first time here, and the dungeon's structure wasn't constant□but I managed to send them both off.

Villagers called out to the two and celebrated their safe return.

“Alan! Rick!”

“Are you two okay?!”

“I'm so glad you're safe!”

Meanwhile, Alice and Eve came to me.

“Good job, Ryota!”

“There are more people inside, so I'm heading back in.”

“Hey, listen! Another person made it out!”

“Did they manage to escape the monsters?”

“Nope. The dungeon changed when you went in, and they appeared at the entrance.”

“Aha! So the place they were in happened to get moved near the entrance. Even closer than Rick, huh?”

“They were lucky,” Eve cut in matter-of-factly.

They were lucky, indeed. It was lucky for all of us that I'd gone in and one of the people I was trying to rescue got to leave because of it.

“I'll head back in now,” I declared. “How many people are left?”

“Hmm... Since Rick just came out, there should be thirteen more.”

“That's a lot... I wish they'd stay still, but I know that's beyond their control.”

I recalled the situation that these villagers were in. It would be

best if I assumed they were scattered throughout the dungeon.

“I’ll go, too,” Eve offered.

“Good idea. Thanks. The monsters aren’t that strong, so I’m sure you can handle them just fine.”

“Mhm.”

“What about me?” Alice asked.

“They’re too much for you, Alice. Wait outside for me.”

“...Okay. I’ll do that.”

And so, we left Alice outside and went into the dungeon together.



I proceeded through the dungeon, smashing monsters one by one. I had gone in first, with Eve behind me. We were only a step apart, but I was warped somewhere else in the dungeon the moment Eve stepped inside. Rogue dungeons really were a challenge to deal with.

While I hurried onward, I racked my brain: was there no efficient way to tackle this?

Since the construction kept changing, I assumed brute force was the only option, so I put my right hand on the wall and continued turning right. To my knowledge, this was the best way to map the place.

I pressed on, killing more and more monsters, when I suddenly heard a voice call out from afar.

“Help!”

The moment I heard it, I ran, turned two corners, and found a little girl bawling. She was holding her knees as she cried like a baby.

“I’m hungry... I’m cold...”

“Hey, you!”

“Oh, an old guy? Who are you?”

“Old□”

For a moment, I was left speechless. It kind of hurt to be called old when I wasn't mentally prepared for it. Still, I suppressed my shock and ran over to the girl.

“Are you okay? Hurt anywhere?”

“I'm okay...”

“Good. What's your name?”

“Mel.”

“Mel? Okay, Mel, we're gonna get you out of here.”

“But there are so many scary demons. They'll find me if I move...”

“If you move?”

“Yeah! I think if you stay still, they can't see you.”

“Really?!”

I had no idea. I mean, how could I have noticed? When I encountered monsters in dungeons, I didn't always attack first, but I always prepared for battle. Staying perfectly still wasn't an option, so I'd never have noticed a foe having a crazy limitation like that.

What is this, Jurassic Park?

“That's why I was staying still,” she said.

“Yeah? Well done. Now let's get you outside.”

“But the demons...”

“It'll be fine.”

I helped the girl up and shielded her as we walked, keeping my right hand on the wall the whole time. A monster appeared and tried to attack Mel, but I killed it in an instant.

After twenty minutes of walking, we reached the exit. When we made it out, people gathered around Mel like they had Alan and his son. A young woman hugged her and cried; she was Mel's mother. She cried tears of joy after being freed from panic and stress.

Meanwhile, I asked Alice, “How many left?”

“Twelve.”

“Eve hasn’t found anyone yet, huh? Tch... This is gonna take forever.”

“Sucks that everyone got separated, huh?”

“If only we could throw more people at the problem. Clint mentioned that a small number of elites would be better due to how the dungeon works, but since they’re spread out all over the place, maybe more people would be better.”

“Should we send everyone from the village inside?”

“The monsters here are pretty strong.”

“How strong?” Alice asked. I noticed Boney and Bubbly on her shoulders.

“I’d say about five times stronger than your little friends.”

“So they’re really, *really* strong...”

“Honestly, if you went in there, you’d just cause another emergency. Don’t bother... Oh, but if the villagers were all adventurers, maybe we’d get somewhere.”

A certain memory came to mind. Just like when Rick had tried to escape, if someone went in, they could potentially warp someone away when they were near the entrance.

“If we had a lot of adventurers who could protect themselves, throwing one in at a time could let us take advantage of the dungeon’s changes.”

“That would be way faster!” Alice agreed.

“Still, no point in wishing for the impossible. I’ll head back in now.”

“Wait, Ryota! I’ll go in, too. It’ll take too long for you to go alone.”

“But...”

“It’s okay. Boney and Bubbly are with me, so I’ll be safe.”

“...Guess so. Let me tell you one thing, though. Apparently, the monsters here can’t see you if you stay still. If things get rough, do that.”

“Okay. Boney and Bubbly, did you hear that?” she asked.

They rattled and bounced atop her shoulders. It was cute any other time they did that, but now wasn’t a good time. Still, they obeyed Alice and stopped moving. As long as she could stop them, that was fine

“...Huh?” I gasped.

“Ryota? What’s the matter?”

“Alice... What happens to Boney and Bubbly when they come back from battle mode? Or when they’re defeated?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where do they go?”

“They come back to me,” Alice replied and turned Boney big. Even when she was in her normal size, the skeleton retained that cute chibi look. She rattled as she walked ten steps away. Then, she disappeared and returned to Alice. “See?”

“I see... Say, Alice?”

“What?”

“Will the dungeon change...if they go in?”

“Huh...? Oh!”

It seemed Alice had the same idea as me.

We ran over to the dungeon entrance. Villagers gathered around us, curious.

“Alice,” I said, giving her the signal to act.

“Okay. Go, Boney!”

Boney became a full skeleton again, but thanks to her funny appearance, the villagers weren’t scared. The skeleton then went into

the dungeon and disappeared.

“It works!”

“Yeah! It’s just like when you, Eve, and Alan went in.”

“Can you bring her back?” I asked.

“Just a sec... Welcome back, Boney!” she said. Boney was back on Alice’s shoulder. “Go, Bubbly.”

This time, the slime went into the dungeon and disappeared. The dungeon’s layout changed again. Bubbly then returned.

“This should work!” I said, excited. “Can you do this over and over, Alice?”

“Yeah! Go, you two!” Alice sent her monsters into the dungeon one after another. As a result, it changed every ten seconds. Once we’d done that ten times, a house that was in flames appeared at the entrance. Worse, a demon was setting fire to it and breaking parts of it down.

“That’s Krau’s house!”

“It’s burning from a monster attack!”

“We’d better help her!”

Seeing this, the villagers all ran at once.

“Don’t go in! Argh, stop jumping the gun!” I shouted.

They were too carried away to hear me, so I fired restraining rounds. Ropes of light trapped them in place.

“What’s this?!”

“Let us go!”

I ignored the angry villagers and switched to a homing round. It was hard to aim from outside the dungeon, and the demon often ducked behind the building, so I had to use these.

I fired all twelve. They flew in random arcs as they plunged into the dungeon and defeated the little demon.

“Is anyone in there?” I called from outside the dungeon. A

middle-aged woman emerged from the building.

She was coughing, and her face was covered in soot, but she could walk on her own two feet. The woman named Krau took unsteady steps, but she managed to exit the dungeon all the same.

“One in three minutes, huh? Let’s keep up this pace.”

“Okay!” Alice kept sending her monster friends in to change the dungeon. The layout changes seemed to be random, but we kept on going and going.

By the time ten minutes had turned into twenty, more villagers were warped to the entrance. I defeated the monsters near them from outside, shot recovery rounds at the wounded, and threw rope to the people who still couldn’t move so that I could pull them out.

Now that they understood what I was doing, the villagers on the outside calmed down and left it all to us.

An hour later, we’d rescued the last one. The villagers surrounded us with cheers and thanks. Incidentally...

“I *really* hate you, low level.”

Having suffered through over a hundred dungeon changes, Eve gave me a hefty chop to the head.

86. Striking Gold

As someone from this village, Alice had her own home. It was simple, much like those of the other villagers.

Eve and I decided to stay the night there.

“Sorry, okay?” I apologized to the bunny once more. “We had to do that to get the people out fast.”

“...I got shaken up so much.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“You’re awful, low level.”

“I apologized! Forgive me, already.”

“You have no reason to live, low level.”

“Do you have to go that far?! Also, aren’t you just back to saying you hate me like before?”

“Aww... Now I have no reason to live, either.”

Eve was unusually down. It was rare for her to be so expressive about anything other than carrots. She must’ve had it rough when she was getting jostled around by constant dungeon changes.

Alice and I apologized nonstop.

“...One hundred carrots,” she eventually demanded.

“I’ll get you plenty of S-rank carrots when we go home.”

“You are forgiven.”

Eve finally forgave us. I felt relieved.

“I’m glad we saved everyone!” Alice piped up. “It’s thanks to you, Ryota. Lannana would’ve been in real trouble if not for you.”

“You mean the woman who was really hurt, right?”

All of the people we’d saved from the dungeon were hurt to varying degrees. I could heal the majority with recovery rounds, but one had such torn-up limbs that she still appeared to be on death’s

door. Since recovery rounds alone had failed, I'd managed to heal her with recovery rounds that were fully charged by buffing rounds.

"You're amazing for being able to heal even that!"

More than me being amazing, I thought it was the buffing rounds that were amazing. I essentially had perfect healing magic that could heal anyone as long as they weren't outright dead.

In Alice's house, we breathed a sigh of relief at the successful rescue and chatted together.

We hadn't been out for one full day yet, and I already missed Emily's home. I was getting homesick.

"Oh... By the way, Ryota, what drops did you get?" Alice asked.

"Drops? Now that you mention it, I didn't see any."

"Yeah! I noticed that there weren't any, either, even when you killed a bunch at the dungeon entrance."

I nodded in agreement.

When we had Boney and Bubbly changing up the dungeon, villagers weren't the only ones who ended up at the entrance; those little demons had, too. I killed them from outside to make way for Alice's monsters, but looking back, they hadn't dropped anything.

"Maybe they don't drop stuff if you kill them from outside?"

"That shouldn't be how it works. I did the opposite when I was getting my first freezing rounds. Besides, I killed some in the dungeon when I saved Alan and his son."

"Is it a dungeon without drops?"

"Like Nihonium? If so, it should still drop stuff for me."

Unlike other people, I had S-rank drops. In situations where other people didn't get drops, I always got something. It was kind of unthinkable for me to not get drops from a monster.

"Did you kill monsters in there, Eve?" I asked.

"No drops."

“I wonder what the deal is...”

When I put a hand to my chin in thought, I heard a woman shriek from outside.

“Eeeeeek!”

I pushed open the door and ran out in the general direction of the voice. Eventually, I arrived at the dungeon’s moonlit entrance. A woman was being assaulted by one of those little demon things. It attacked with that annoying look on its face. On closer inspection, I realized she was wounded.

“How dare you!” I roared as I fired normal rounds over and over to get it away from her. When it evaded, I predicted the direction it would go in and fired a piercing round.

The little demon ran straight into the piercing round.

These monsters were intelligent. They evaded in ways that other monsters would never think to. They acted like an experienced adventurer would, which was what allowed me to predict what they would do.

When struck, it fell to the ground and started spasming. I ignored it and ran over to the woman, squatting down to check on her.

“Are you okay?”

“My arm... It hurts...”

“Don’t worry. Just stay still.”

I loaded a recovery round. After checking her injuries, I loaded just one buffing round and fired. A magic circle appeared, enveloping her in healing light. By the time the light settled, she’d been fully healed.

“Huh? My wounds...”

“Feeling okay now?”

“Did you do that? Thank you...”

I nodded and stood up.

Looks like I estimated her injuries just right. Good.

Loading more buffing rounds made the effect stronger when I fired something. However, for each one I added, I lost versatility due to being unable to load actual shots I could fire. My big problem as of late was learning to discern how many buffing rounds I needed.

“Ryota!” Alice called out, having followed me.

“Everything’s okay now.”

“Good... Oh!”

“What’s up?”

“Look.”

Alice came over and whispered into my ear. A lone bullet was in the place where the monster had fallen and spasmed.

I glanced at the woman, who was looking up at me with grateful eyes, and said to Alice, “Take care of her for me.”

“Okay!”

After confirming that Alice had taken her away, I picked up the bullet. It was a bullet I’d never seen before, dropped by an outsider demon.

I put it in my gun, removed the buffing round, and fired it at the ground. A magic circle appeared where it had landed, causing lightning to crackle on the ground.

An electric round, huh? That’s good and all, but...

This drop came from an outsider...and outsiders came from drops that had been left in places without any people around. There weren’t any people right here, sure. The homes had been swallowed up, probably sowing some seeds of trauma in the villagers. As such, nobody was near the dungeon entrance at all.

It was the perfect location for creating outsiders, but where had the drops come from?

“What’s wrong?” Eve asked me.

“Oh, hey, Eve. An outsider demon appeared. That means drops must have been left around here, but I have no idea how or where.”

“I defeated a lot of them, but I didn’t see any drops.”

“Right? Neither did I.”

I put a hand to my chin and thought, *Maybe I should go in again and check.*

But then, the moonlight happened to highlight the cleavage peeking out from Eve’s bunny suit.

“This is it!” I exclaimed as I approached and stared. A particular point gleamed in the moonlight. “This is... Could it be?”

Bonk!

My cranium was struck. I backed off, holding my head.

Eve glared at me in irritation.

“Wh-What?”

“You touched my boob.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry! I didn’t realize!”

“No free gropes.”

“So it’s fine if I pay?!”

“Two hundred carrots per squeeze.”

It seemed Eve was back to her usual self.

“I don’t know if that’s cheap or expensive!”

Leaving that aside, I pointed at her chest.

“Notice the shiny part there?”

“Shiny? Could it be...?”

“Yeah. That’s gotta be gold.”

Eve put a finger in her cleavage and scooped it out. It was a grain-sized chunk of gold.



I entered the dungeon. When a little demon saw me, it flashed an evil grin and ran away. I chased it down and fell into a pitfall trap, which had sharp blades at the bottom to impale anyone who fell in. However, I quickly fired freeze rounds to freeze them before using them as platforms to kick off and leap out of the pit. Then, I fired a homing round at the monster who'd set the trap.

After that, I opened the pouch I'd equipped ahead of time. It was hard to see inside the dungeon, but as expected, there was a grain of gold inside.

Indeed, this dungeon's drop was gold. The grains were small enough that I'd easily overlooked them when I was in a hurry, but I was certain now.

The fresh dungeon in such a plain village dropped gold, of all things. In the span of a day, this news spread throughout the village and to nearby cities. And when dawn broke...

87. Benefactor

When I took a morning stroll the next day, I noticed a commotion by the dungeon entrance.

Has something happened again?!

I ran over, but the mood was much more cheerful than I'd expected. Over ten villagers had gathered in a circle to surround one man. I recognized him; he was the father, Alan, that I'd saved yesterday.

Surrounded by villagers, Alan showed off something in his hand.

He noticed me and yelled, "Sato! You came at just the right time."

All the villagers around him turned to me at once. I was curious what was up, so I approached the crowd.

"Thanks for yesterday, Sato. You saved me."

"Is your son doing okay?"

"Yeah, all thanks to you. But take a look at this!" Alan said as he held out his hand. He was holding a few grains of gold. It was probably the gold dust dropped from this dungeon. He had gathered enough to make a chunk just smaller than a BB pellet.

"How'd you get all this?" I asked.

"I went into the dungeon!"

"So you defeated monsters and got their drops?"

"That's right! Say, Sato, how much would these sell for?"

"How much? I wonder..."

This world's currency, the piro, was about equivalent to yen. I considered the value of gold in my previous world.

"Pure gold is about eleven ounces per cubic inch, and one gram is around one hundred and forty thousand yen... In terms of piro, what you're holding would probably be twenty thousand?"

“Oooh!”

My rough calculations made the crowd erupt into cheers.

“Wow! So this little thing could be 20,000 piros?”

“Gold is awesome!”

“I wanna go in there, too! Alan, how strong are those monsters?”

“How long did it take you to gather all that?”

The villagers started bombarding him with questions. I noticed that all the people gathered here were men. When they learned the value of gold, their attitudes changed.

“Those things are pretty darn strong,” Alan explained. “And they’re cunning, too. I’d say only me, Cain, and Carlo could take them on.”

“How long did it take, though?” someone asked.

“I’ve been doing it since last night. This is what you get from pulling an all-nighter,” Alan answered, causing their excitement to dampen somewhat.

On top of being a dangerous place that only a few people could enter, he’d essentially said that the reward for an all-nighter wasn’t that great.

“Strength aside, I think you could speed up your process somewhat,” I said.

“Really, Sato?!”

“The more you farm the dungeon, the more efficient you’ll become. You’ll learn how to defeat monsters faster, how to navigate better... Those sorts of optimizations come naturally over time. If you made 20,000 piros on your first day, I’m sure you could go much higher before long.”

“Oooh!”

The villagers ooh’ed in excitement.

I recalled the Harvest Festival arena and added, “You’ll all get

stronger as you train, too. If you're not strong enough yet, ask for tips from people who are used to it so that you can do better. I bet Alan agrees with that."

"Now that you mention it...there was a trick to the way those things moved. Once you know how they work, I bet you could do it too, Jed."

"Really?!" the youngest man piped up, excited.

"Also, try going in as a party," I added. "You'll get warped to different places if you go in separately, but if you enter at the exact same time, you should stay in the same spot. It'll be easier to fight if you work together."

"Yeah! We ought to have a shot if we go in as a group. Everyone here would have a shot, in fact." Alan nodded.

The villagers became more excited.

"You think even we can do it?"

"We've got a dungeon in our village. Now's our time, fellas."

"I'm gonna make money with this gold and get Leah to marry me!"

Uh, let's just ignore that last one. He's a little weird.

They each spoke up, growing more and more eager. I gave them a few pointers. Tips for spending time in dungeons, how to make money fast□I taught them everything I could on the spot.

"The most important thing is that you shouldn't do anything crazy in dungeons. Your goal is to keep on defeating monsters and bringing home drops, so you can't push yourself too hard."

I was serious about that last part. Everyone fell silent and looked at me. It seemed like the adventurers of this world understood just how important that was.

"Remember these words well: 'I can keep going.' The moment you think that, it's time to leave. You'll end up in much worse shape if you

push yourself and collapse.”

“Urk...” Alan groaned.

He did that already, huh?

“There’s a proverb where I come from: run away and live to fight another day.”

Though I come from a place without dungeons.

In this world, where everything dropped from dungeons that people had to farm, those words needed to be spread far and wide.



I left Alan’s group and wandered around the village. It was very quiet and empty once you got away from the dungeon’s entrance. It seemed like a nice place to just hang out. But despite the silence, I felt a sense of foreboding.

Villagers and men in adventurer gear had gathered in front of the house of the chief, whom I’d met yesterday. The villagers glared at the adventurers with obvious malice in their eyes.

“Ryota!”

“Oh, Alice. What’s going on here?” I asked Alice as she ran toward me from the group of villagers.

“People are here from Methylene.”

“Methylene?”

“It’s the patron of this village.”

“Patron?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. What did that mean?

“Umm, so there are villages out there without dungeons, like this one used to be. Most villages like ours get by thanks to aid from big cities.”

“Aid? Like... Oh!” I recalled Selenium. That dungeon had formed in the middle of nowhere, right between Cyclo and Hetero. It had led

to conflict between the two cities. However, if a dungeon formed in the middle of a village, or in that village's sphere of influence, it would naturally belong to said village. In turn, it would belong to their patron city. In other words, this patronage was an initial investment that gambled on securing dungeons later.

"Yep, that's right," Alice confirmed. "When they heard we had a new dungeon, a big shot came from the city."

"I see."

That made sense. But what was with the imposing mood?

The adventurers were most likely bodyguards of the big shot from Methylene, but the villagers appeared rather angry about their presence.

What's going on here?

"Leave at once!" someone screamed from inside the chief's residence. It seemed things weren't going well.

The adventurers furrowed their brows, while the villagers pumped their fists with smug looks on their faces.

Eventually, the door was flung open, and a well-dressed man came out.

"Just you wait. We'll□"

The chief roared, "You might have helped us establish this village, but you've done nothing for us since then. You didn't even send help when we were trapped in the dungeon! I have nothing more to discuss with you!"

"Yeah, you tell him!"

The villagers harmonized with the chief's rage.

"Of course he's mad," Alice commented. "Methylene is so close to this village that it's visible from here."

"Really?" I asked as I looked at her, surprised.

"Yep. There are trees in the way, but sometimes, you can see

between the gaps.”

“That’s way closer than Cyclo.”

“They definitely went and asked for help.”

Due to Indole’s close relationship and proximity, they’d requested aid from Methylene. However, Methylene had ignored them, so they begged Cyclo for help. And yet, Methylene had come now, when it would benefit them. I could sympathize with the villagers’ anger.

“Calm down and think rationally,” the big shot said. “You know Indole can’t run that dungeon on its own.”

“Ngh...” the chief groaned.

That was fair. Just as Alan and the others had known nothing about farming in the dungeon, the chief wouldn’t have the necessary knowledge to manage it.

He was at a loss. But as his eyes wandered, they found me, and he returned to his firmness from before.

“I’m not worried.”

“Oh?”

“Indole’s benefactor can solve this problem!” he declared, eyes fixed on me.

The big shot, adventurers, and villagers alike focused on me—and the latter cheered.

88. A Dungeon's Potential

“Benefactor, hm?” the big shot from Methylene mumbled as he furrowed his brow. He glared at me, as if sizing me up. His eyes were unpleasant, like those of a snake or other reptile. “Looks like an ordinary adventurer to me. Who are you, boy?”

“Ryota Sato. And yeah, I’m just an ordinary adventurer.”

“What is a mere adventurer doing here?”

“When people ask for help, you go and help. I know that, so why don’t you? Methylene’s a whole lot closer than Cyclo.”

“Cyclo?” the man said, his brow twitching. “We were making preliminary steps in the rescue plan. New dungeons require sending strong personnel, so we must be prudent in our appraisal and selection.”

I glared at him and replied, “Yeah? Well, the Cyclo Dungeon Association sent me right away. You should know how strong your adventurers are, since they farm every day. What the hell were you appraising?”

“...”

He was visibly angrier now.

The villagers used my rebuttal as an opportunity to jeer at him.

“Yeah, he’s right!”

“He came less than twelve hours after they gave him the request!”

The man glared at me, and then at the villagers. They shrank back from his snake-like eyes, but bounced back and started yelling again.

Eventually, the big shot turned to the chief and said, “Fine. If you want to cry to Cyclo, then go for it.”

“Not Cyclo. We’ll rely on our benefactor.”

“Yeah, yeah!” the onlookers cried.

“It’s the same thing,” the man stated with a cold grin. “You’ll have to return the money we invested into your village first, of course.”

“Mrgh...” the chief groaned and flinched. The villagers, meanwhile, fell silent.

The man then added, as if dealing the killing blow, “Ten billion piros. I expect it to be repaid in full.”

“You never gave us that much!”

“Haven’t you ever heard of interest?”

Even I knew he was demanding the impossible.



After receiving word of what had happened, Clint arrived that night. I showed him to the chief’s home. Once he’d heard a summary of the events from us, he frowned and murmured to himself.

Incidentally, I had used my magic cart to send the message. I’d put a letter in there and used the warp function to send it home. Emily, whom he recognized from Selenium, delivered the letter to him. Clint then rushed here, which brings us to now.

He drank coffee full of sugar cubes, as usual, as he spoke to the chief.

“There’s no doubt that this is extortion. They haven’t helped you since the initial investment, correct?”

The chief was almost twice Clint’s age, but the power dynamic between them was the opposite.

“Y-Yes, sir. That is correct.”

“I took a quick look at the scale of your village. Given the population and the state of it, I’d put the investment at only one

hundredth of that.”

So one hundred million, then.

I didn’t know if that was a lot or a little, but I was certain Clint was right.

“Cyclo has a few villages under its wing, too,” Clint added. “Frankly, maintaining them is more expensive than establishing them. Villages without dungeons hemorrhage money, you see.”

“Because they don’t make money, right?” I asked.

“Yeah, but they’re an investment. If a dungeon like this appears, it doesn’t just go away; it stays there forever.”

“Is that so?”

I didn’t know that.

“That doesn’t mean dungeons can’t drain your resources, though. Dungeons like Nihonium, for example. Though, the one in this village doesn’t fall into that category, so Cyclo wouldn’t mind taking it on.”

Nihonium is a hell of a boon for me, though.

“We would like to leave it to our benefit.”

“Not without two thousand tons of sugar,” Clint rebutted. The chief groaned again. “We’ll have to investigate the dungeon, but as it stands, it’ll be hard to justify such a large expense.”

“Really?”

“That would change if we had some, say...tasty additional information on the dungeon.”

The chief was at a loss, so he looked at me, pleading for help.

Hey, don’t give me that look. We’re talking hard cash here. I can’t pay off ten billion on my own.

That was why I’d contacted Clint, but even he claimed that he couldn’t pay it off as things stood. What were we to do?

Suddenly, the door to the chief’s residence was flung open and a man ran in.

“Is Sato here?! There you are!”

“Who are you?”

I recognized him, but I didn’t know his name.

I think...

“I’m Carlo! We met in front of the dungeon this morning.”

“Oh, right. Alan said you could take on those monsters.”

Alan had judged a few people strong enough to fight the monsters, and therefore farm the dungeon, based on his experience. Carlo was one of them.

Apparently at his wit’s end, Carlo shouted, “Sato, there’s an emergency! Alan is missing!”

“What?!”



Carlo and I ran to the dungeon’s entrance. A crowd had gathered around it. The torches they held lit their faces, revealing a clear sense of unease, but they changed in an instant when I appeared.

“It’s Sato! Sato is here!”

“Alan’s gonna live!”

People cheered.

Rick□Alan’s son, whom I’d saved the other day□begged, “Please, Sato! Save my father!”

“Tell me what’s going on first.”

Carlo answered, “Alan and I went into that dungeon together. I came back, since it was nighttime, but he stayed in there, saying he could keep going.”

“What an idiot! I just got through telling everyone to give up when they started thinking that.”

“And, erm...” another villager nervously spoke up. “There’s an

extra strong monster in there. It's not like the little ones. And Alan hasn't come back yet, so..."

"There's a different monster?"

A few possibilities came to mind, so I asked the villagers, "Is there only one? And did you see any of the small ones after seeing that one?"

"Huh? Umm...I did. They chased me until I was out of the dungeon."

"A rare, then," I realized.

If other monsters existed at the time, then at least it wasn't a dungeon master. That alone was a relief.

"Got it. I'm going in!" I declared. The villagers breathed a sigh of relief while I loaded every kind of bullet I had and stepped inside the dungeon.



I equipped my pouch and defeated little demons along the way. They had tricky movements, occasionally even playing dead to try to trick me, but I was used to them by now, so I knew how to kill them.

However, while I was used to the monsters themselves, the dungeon was a different story. As a rogue dungeon that changed form when people entered, I had to comb the place to find Alan.

"...Might as well try this."

I loaded five buffing rounds in one gun and slotted a homing round in the last chamber. Then, I fired into the empty air.

The bullet flew straight forward and rounded a corner. I followed it. When I'd run about a hundred and fifty feet, I found a little demon on the ground. It wasn't fatal, so I finished it off with a normal bullet from my other gun.

I fired another homing round. When it rounded a corner, I followed it again.

This was going surprisingly well. I didn't know where monsters might appear due to the random layout of the dungeon, so I searched for the rare monster using my strongest homing rounds. Since they followed monsters, I could follow the bullets to find them.

On the sixth attempt, I found the rare monster!

Goat head, human body. Demonic, bat-like wings. It was a devil monster, standing at about seven feet.

Unlike the weaker ones so far, this one was a rare monster...and Alan was at its feet.

"Alan!" I called out. Unfortunately, he didn't answer. "Tch!"

I fired my guns to chase off the demon. Then, I charged toward it while shooting recovery rounds into Alan.

The demon brushed off my bullets as it backed away. Meanwhile, the recovery rounds hit Alan and created a magic circle of healing.

"Ngh..." he groaned and started to move. He was still alive.

Once I'd given him a max-buffed recovery round, I faced the demon once more. I felt pressure stinging my skin. It lived up to its title of rare monster, that was for sure. The thing was pretty intimidating, but I had to kill it.

I made the first move and fired a cluster of normal bullets. The demon brushed them aside with its fist. On top of its humanoid form, that was a very martial artist-like defense.

"If normal ones won't work, then how about this?!"

This time, I fired freeze and flame rounds simultaneously to fuse them into an annihilation round. But the demon dodged it! Instead of punching it away, it jumped to the side. The bullet flew on and hollowed out a hole in the dungeon wall.

I gulped and stared down my foe. It could deflect my normal

bullets, and it knew to dodge the annihilation round at first glance. It was *really* strong. And smart, too. The little demons were clever, but this one had real intelligence.

Talk about annoying. What do I do?

But before I could even finish that thought, the demon closed in. It had more than B-rank speed as it swung its fist—the same one that had deflected bullets—at me. I guarded with my arms and jumped to the side. I landed safely, but my arm stung. That was about A-rank strength, I'd say.

It attacked again, this time by holding out a magic circle-clad arm. Three fireballs shot like arrows at me.

“You can use magic, too?!”

I kicked off the ground to jump back, firing freeze rounds to stifle the fireballs. Unfortunately, the suddenness of it all caused me to miss one.

I crossed my arms to guard against the fireball. Flames soon engulfed me. Once it was gone, I injected myself with a recovery round. That was pretty strong—stronger than the Bicorn Horns, but weaker than Inferno. I didn't know much about magic, but I'd put that at around level 2.

This enemy was fast, strong, able to use magic, and smart to boot—an annoying all-rounder type.

“But you won't stop me!”

I put one gun away and inhaled deeply. Then, I opened my eyes wide and charged at it.

Fast. Strong. Able to use magic. Annoying, indeed. But I'm faster and stronger!

I closed in with greater speed than the demon, used my empty hand to grab it by the neck, and pushed it backward, ramming it right into a wall.

Boom!

The dungeon shook from the impact. Half of the demon's body got stuck in the wall.

It resisted with a swing of its powerful arm, so I stood there and gritted my teeth! As long as I knew it was coming, there was nothing I couldn't withstand with my S-rank HP and vitality.

It felt like I'd been slapped with a giant fan. I stood my ground through sheer will, tightened my grip on its neck, and shoved my gun into the demon's open mouth.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

I fired rapidly at point-blank range. Cartridges flew about as the demon spasmed in pain. Once I'd finished firing, the demon's body relaxed. Its head was mostly blown off by that point.

Eventually, it disappeared with a sizzling sound.

"Phew..." I sighed.

That was a tough fight. The demon was fast, strong, and smart. On top of that, it was my first time facing one. As I put my guns away, I knew that such a well-rounded enemy would be difficult for the adventurers here to handle.

Something felt weird. My hip was...heavy? I looked down and noticed my pouch had stretched out. When I opened it and looked inside, I saw a giant chunk of gold to go with all the gold dust. It was hefty, too. That was definitely the weight of gold.

I'd say it's...about two pounds? It's just like the hunks of gold I've seen in pictures.

Two pounds of gold would go for a few million piros.

"Huh... This raises the value of the dungeon, doesn't it?" I mused.

A dungeon that dropped gold dust, with a rare monster that dropped nuggets of gold...

I took the gold in hand and recalled what Clint had said earlier.

89. Hired Figurehead

Alan and I left the dungeon. Getting out was a pain in and of itself, since the place changed form. Though he'd been healed by the recovery rounds, Alan's loss to the demon had left him with mental wounds. Whenever little demons attacked, he'd jump out of fear and shrink back.

I protected him as we left the place.

"Sato, Alan! Are you okay?!" Carlo exclaimed as he ran over, and the other villagers followed suit.

"S-Sorry for worrying you all..."

"Your clothes are a mess! Did a monster get you?"

"Yeah... Who knows what might have happened if not for Sato..."

"Oooh..."

In front of a dungeon at night, in the midst of a crowd of torches, villagers gazed at me with respectful eyes.

Alan's son, Rick, stepped forth and bowed his head to me.

"Thank you so much for saving my father!"

"Don't mention it. More importantly, Alan..."

"Wh-What?"

"You've learned how dangerous it is to think, 'I can keep going,' right?"

"Y-Yeah... It was a painful lesson."

"Make sure you let everyone else know that. They'll find it more persuasive coming from you."

Fear remained on his face, but he firmly answered, "Okay, I'll do just that. I promise, nobody else is going to make that same mistake."

Despite the light trauma, I figured it was a net benefit if the villagers learned from his mistake.

Outside of the reverent ring around me, I spotted Clint and the chief. The crowd parted to let them through.

“Clint, take a look at this,” I said.

“Is this...a gold nugget?”

“The rare monster dropped it.”

“...I see.”

The Dungeon Association leader understood my implicit meaning.

“Normal monsters drop gold dust, while rare monsters drop these huge nuggets,” I declared. “This dungeon is a worthwhile gold deposit.”

“Sure seems like it. What are the lower floors like?”

“I haven’t checked yet due to the constant layout changes.”

“All right. I’ll look into that myself. Either way, we can make real money from this. We’ll bring this village under Cyclo’s umbrella.”

When it came to moving hundreds of millions of piros, giving Clint that little nudge was the best I could do. I was just relieved that he had responded to it.

“Thanks, Sato,” Clint said. “All of this is because of your efforts.”

“I’ll assume the worst□”

“First things first, I’ll send over two thousand tons of sugar.”

“I knew I should assume the worst!”

“Don’t be modest. Sugar is great!”

“I’m not being modest! I don’t want it! How am I gonna dispose of that much sugar?!”

I knew the value of it, but just imagining that much gave me heartburn. My entire being refused it.

“Aww... Well, I’ll think of how to reward you in the coming days. The next step is negotiating with Methylene.”

“Thanks.”

“E-Excuse me!” the chief finally cut in after being silent this

whole time.

“What’s the matter?”

“W-We wish to be under our benefactor’s umbrella, not Cyclo’s!”

“Sato’s?” Clint said, furrowing his brow.

What is the chief going on about?

“Wait a second, sir,” I protested. “I’m just an adventurer. I don’t have the power or money to negotiate with Methylene. Besides, Clint is the one who sent me here in the first place.”

“B-But...” he trailed off as he glanced at Clint, then quickly averted his eyes upon seeing the dungeon chief’s frown. “W-We don’t trust cities...”

Suddenly, I noticed that all of the gathered villagers were looking at me. Their eyes were pleading.

We don’t trust cities.

Perhaps that was because Indole Village had been treated coldly by Methylene for so long. A poor village with little to its name, full of starving people with tattered clothes and kids who often fled the village entirely. Was this the result of being ignored by their patron city for so many years?

That thought made me want to try doing something to somehow help this neglected village.

While I wondered how I could help, Clint spoke up and said, “Then let’s make an Indole Dungeon Association. Sato can be the chief of it.”

“Huh?”

I was surprised. The villagers clamored in excitement.

“You’ll have your own Dungeon Association instead of being under Cyclo’s. You’re satisfied as long as Sato’s in charge, right?”

“Yes, of course!” the chief replied, eliciting agreement from the villagers.

“No complaints about Sato himself!”

“He’s saved us twice now!”

While the people put me on a pedestal, Clint looked at me. I got his silent message: *Well, there you have it.*

“B-But I’m just an adventurer...” I complained.

“You can keep being an adventurer. I leave Cyclo to dungeoneer all the time.”

“You do?!”

“Adventurers these days don’t have what it takes. It’s not *just* about killing monsters.”

“It’s not?”

What does he mean by that?

“It’s about love, boy! You get the world’s best sugar only by killing them with love.”

“Oh... Er, okay.”

I was annoyed with myself for taking him seriously. It was just Clint being crazy again; love couldn’t overcome drop rates in this world. That much was made clear by the fact that Eve always came to me for carrots.

Drop rates > Love. That was how this world worked, though I didn’t bother to say it. Either way, I now understood that even Clint went to dungeons sometimes. In other words, he was implying that I could stick to my current way of life.

But of course, Cyclo would foot the bill, so I was basically a hired figurehead. Or wait, maybe a figure...chief?

“Me as the Indole Dungeon Association’s chief, huh?” I mused.

Clint nodded.

The villagers gazed at me with pleading, expectant looks. They’d been neglected for far too long.

“...I’d like to make a few preliminary decisions,” I said,

insinuating that they were my conditions for accepting.

“Let’s hear ’em.”

“First, we need to discount taxation on the villagers’ sales.”

“Let’s just make it zero,” Clint answered readily.

I’d wanted to suggest the same thing. Given the strength and numbers of the villagers, exempting them from taxes wouldn’t make a difference. It was little more than a rounding error.

Clint added, “To start, we’ll invest taxes into infrastructure.”

“Naturally,” I replied. That seemed like the obvious plan. The mountain of gold that was this dungeon would draw adventurers from all over, which would lead to the development of infrastructure to sustain them.

I added a few more conditions, since this was my chance to help the citizens here. Clint, and therefore Cyclo, wouldn’t be able to get this dungeon without me. Plus, I just felt like I had to. Clint probably wouldn’t repeat past mistakes, but I wanted to make sure the people of Indole weren’t neglected like they had been under Methylene.

Thus, I proposed all the conditions I could think of. These were all rather obvious, though. I hadn’t made any unreasonable demands.

Clint accepted them all with ease.

“Anything else?” he asked.

“That’s enough for me. Good luck with Methylene.”

“Leave it to me, bud,” Clint said before leaving.

Now, we’d just have to wait for their negotiations to end.

Maybe I shouldn’t leave it all to him... Like with Selenium, I might be needed again. I’ll have to stay on my toes in case that time comes.

The chief and villagers surrounded me.

“Thank you! Thank you, Sato!”

“That’s our benefactor for you!”

“Yeah! Standing on equal terms with the chief of a huge city’s

Dungeon Association takes a real man!”

“I’m gonna work for Sato’s sake! I’ll work hard and get stronger!”

“Sato, make me your apprentice!”

The villagers mobbed me to no end to express their gratitude.

90. Counterstrike

I woke up in Alice's home, which I still hadn't taken to. Naturally, the place was just as plain as the others in this poor village, but what I really missed was the warmth of Emily's home.

"Man, I've been spoiled," I muttered to myself as I looked around the house.

She didn't have proper furniture, the place didn't have any separate rooms... Eve, Alice, and I were just sleeping huddled in a cabin. Boney and Bubbly sat on Alice's head like cats, while Eve was wrestling with a shabby blanket.

"Clunky, you can't... Huh? Fire and ice don't work on you?"

"No carrots, no future..."

They talked in their sleep.

Must be having some nice dreams.

I got out of bed, figuring I ought to go make some money in the dungeon.

First, I checked my gear. Two guns, check. Various kinds of bullets, check. I didn't use the pouch when going to a dungeon for the first time, but I equipped it now, since I knew this dungeon's drops.

Next, the slime's tear. I hadn't checked its bonus effect after having it re-dropped from the Harvest Festival outsider, but those little demons liked their surprise attacks, so I equipped it just in case.

Knock, knock!

Once my equipment check was done, someone knocked on the door.

I glanced at Alice and Eve, who still remained fast asleep. And so, I decided to answer it myself.

"Hi, who's there? Wait..."

When I opened the door, I was greeted by three girls. They were all from the village. At fifteen or sixteen, they'd be high schoolers in my old world.

"I-It's Mr. Sato! Uh, I didn't expect him to answer. What now?"

"Just do it! C'mon, Reese."

"I-I can't do it! Why don't you?"

When the girls saw my face, they began arguing about who should talk to me.

What's going on? I wondered.

After much debate, two of the girls pushed the one in the middle toward me, so she steeled herself and spoke up.

"Mr. Sato!"

"Y-Yes?"

"Thank you for saving us all the day before yesterday."

"Oh, yeah. You got stuck in the dungeon, too, right?"

"Right! You were...very cool when you saved us..."

"Bwuh?"

A dumb sound made its way out of my mouth.

Cool? Is she hitting on me or something?!

I started to panic. This had never happened to me before. Still, this was no time to get all flustered.

"I... I think so, too!"

"M-Me, too..."

The other two agreed with her.

"Bwargh?!"

All three of them gazed into my eyes, as if trying to get something out of me. I could feel the passion in their gazes, but what was I supposed to do?

"Th-Thanks..." I said, managing to squeeze out a weak answer.

"Aww!"

“Hooray!”

“Oh, I feel dizzy...”

It seemed they were happy with my crappy answer.

I just stood there, astonished.



After Alice had woken up, we began walking to the dungeon together. When I told her what had happened, she responded, “Well, duh!”

Incidentally, Eve had woken up and disappeared at some point.

“Duh?”

“You’re young and handsome, and you’re important enough that the Dungeon Association chief comes when you call him!”

“Am I handsome? Anyway, Clint is the one who made the request, so of course he’d come and check up on things once the job’s done.”

“You were all heroic when they were in danger, too. That’s a big deal!”

“Th-Think so?”

“Besides, everyone looks up to adventurers. That’s the whole reason I went to Cyclo!”

“I see...”

She had a point. In this world, adventurers had their hands on the flow of all goods. If I wanted to exaggerate, I’d say they held the world in their hands. I could see why people would admire the adventurers who were fighting on the front lines in dungeons, especially people who lived in villages without any.

“We’ll have an association here soon. You’ll be the star of the village!”

“I dunno if I like being called a star, but sure,” I replied as we kept walking.

Along the way to the dungeon, I noticed villagers watching me from afar. They all looked glad to see me. Some of them acted like the girls from this morning.

It felt uncomfortable to have so many eyes on me, so I decided to flee into the dungeon. I ran over to the entrance and said, "All right, let's do this. I'll go first and then return to the entrance."

"Okay! I'll be waiting," Alice assented.

I left her and entered first. To fight through this place together, you had to go in and then meet up afterward.

There were two ways to meet up; I chose the most certain way. That would be going in, finding my way back to the entrance, and being there as Alice entered so we would both be warped to the same place.

I'd chosen to bring her with me due to her special ability. As someone born in a dungeon, she had a way of knowing a dungeon's layout and where its monsters waited. I needed her if I was going to find out whether there were other floors.

In the unfamiliar space, I proceeded along promising-looking pathways in search of the exit. With it effectively being my first time in here, I got a little lost.

Rustle...

There was a sound in the shadows. I wondered if a villager happened to be in there with me at the moment.

"Ah...!"

Suddenly, someone attacked me.

The black figure attacked at lightning speed, drawing an arc through the air with their dull silver blade.

That's no monster!

I grabbed their weapon after it had grazed my nose and hit them with a body blow. They were human, or at least humanoid.

Bent at the hip by my attack, they stopped moving. Or so I'd thought□they let go of their weapon and reached into their clothes, so I let loose a powerful hook, striking them right in the face.

The black figure slammed into a wall and collapsed. On closer inspection, I confirmed they were human. And given their clothing...

“An assassin?”

They had a dagger before I snatched it away, and they attacked out of nowhere while wearing black clothes... That's a cliché assassin, if I've ever seen one. But wait, who would want to assassinate me? And why?

Questions popped into my mind. It was clear that I'd have to capture and interrogate them. Unfortunately, the layout of the dungeon changed! Before I could grab the assassin, the dungeon morphed, separating us.

“...That timing can't be a coincidence.”

I didn't know how they'd done it, but my instincts told me it was a ploy to keep me from capturing them. It wasn't clear if they'd sent a message somehow or if we were being watched, but I knew there was a reason for the layout changing just before I could grab them.

“Should I look for them? No, Alice is at the entrance...”

If the layout had changed, then that meant someone had come in□which meant Alice was in danger at the entrance.

I ran and ran through the labyrinthine dungeon. Whenever little demons appeared, I ignored them and their attacks, which was only made possible by my S-rank HP and vitality.

After five minutes of running, the entrance came into view.

“Alice!”

“Ryota!”

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Yeah, I'm fine. There was a weirdo running away, though.”

“Running away?”

“Yep. Someone shoved me aside and ran in, but the two of them just came out and ran off in a different direction.”

“So they got away, huh?”

“What’s going on?”

“They attacked me,” I explained. “Or, I guess it was an assassination attempt.”

“Assassination?!”

After a moment’s surprise, Alice recalled what they wore and agreed.

“Oh, but they were kinda dressed like that...”

Indeed, it was so cliché that their outfit alone told the tale. But that begged the question, who was that? And why had they done it?

Sucks that I couldn’t capture them.

“Hey, Ryota? Why are you glowing?” Alice asked.

“Huh?”

I realized that I was, indeed, glowing. Or more precisely, something was flashing red in my clothes.

Curious, I took it out.

“The slime’s tear...”

“That’s the one that reflects damage, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a high-guts slime drop. I had it re-dropped by an outsider... Is this light an extra effect, or something?”

I gazed at the slime’s tear, trying to figure out what it might mean.

“Alice... Which way did they run?”

“Umm, that way! And that way!”

She pointed to two opposite directions. I tried going one way while holding the slime’s tear and the flashing slowed down a little. However, when I went the other way, it sped up.

“What’s it mean?” she asked.

“I think...it tracks enemies I’ve encountered.”

I decided to continue in the direction that made it flash faster.



Off in the woods, two people argued.

“So you failed.”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Hmph! That just means he was stronger than expected. I had him pegged as just some up-and-coming family leader, but perhaps I underestimated him.”

“What do we do?”

“Did anyone see your face? Were you followed?”

“No, and no.”

“Then just hide for now. We need to rethink our plans.”

“Got it□Mrgh!”

“What’s wro□? Huh?”

The two people conversing in the woods realized that something was amiss. They had been restrained by what appeared to be light.

“Kh... Wh-What the hell is this?”

“Can’t move... What’s going on?!”

They tried to undo the ropes of light, but no amount of struggling freed them.

“So that’s it, huh?”

“Who’s there?!” one man demanded.

I slowly approached him, putting away my guns because I was certain that my fully-buffed restraining rounds were too strong for them to shake off.

“Ryota...Sato,” he mumbled.

I recognized that face; he was the Dungeon Association head from

Methylene. The one tied up next to him was the assassin from before.

“So you sicced your friend here on me, eh?”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Playing dumb, huh? Fine, this isn’t my thing, anyway. Alice.”

“Here!” Alice exclaimed from right next to me.

“Go back to the village and get Clint. I’m sure he’s good at dealing with this stuff.”

“Got it!” Alice agreed, turned, and ran off.

I was left alone with the two conspirators. The Dungeon Association head from Methylene was hilariously pale now.

91. The Billion-Piro Man

I watched over the restrained duo. They didn't say anything. Hell, they refused to even look at me.

Before long, Alice returned with Clint in tow.

"Aha! Now this is interesting..."

There was a gleam in Clint's eye when he saw them. It sent a shudder down my back. Those were the eyes of a predator gazing at his next meal. I wasn't the prey, but even I was terrified.

And yet, despite all that, he maintained a big smile on his face.

"Don't be mistaken. This is just..."

"Oh, of course. How could I misunderstand? There's nobody here, after all."

Clint was a brazen one; he could lie and say that there was nobody here while looking them right in the eyes.

"Nobody's here, and nothing is happening. Right, Sato?"

"Huh? Uh... Yeah, sounds right to me."

I had no idea what Clint was going to do, but I knew I should just play along.

"As such, I am basically just going to monologue here," Clint declared. Despite his grin, his eyes showed no levity. "I was planning to suggest that we settle the Indole matter with one billion piros. I know it's a hard ask, but I'm certain that you'll agree to it."

Whoa, this is insane. This is blackmail. I've never witnessed blackmail firsthand!

Methylene had demanded an outrageous sum of ten billion piros to release Indole, but Clint was "negotiating" that they lower it to one billion. That was one tenth of their ask, though it was also ten times their initial investment. It seemed more than fair, in my opinion.

This meant my coincidental involvement had led to a nine-billion-piro discount.

Wow, that's kind of incredible.

Clint with his fake smile, and the Methylene chief, who was clearly unhappy, stared each other down for a while, but eventually, the enemy folded.

“Fine. One billion. You can pay it whenever.”

“Mmm, why am I in the mood to talk to myself? Maybe I haven't had enough sugar.”

Clint dramatically produced a bunch of sugar cubes and tossed them into his mouth before chewing on them with loud crunches. Me and my captors alike were taken aback as Clint dominated this discussion. Eventually, he swallowed all of his sugar cubes.

“I might not be able to forget a certain transgression if I'm not paid one billion piro...”

“Wha□?”

Whoaaa! Clint, you're a total madman. He's not negotiating the price down! He's telling them to pay us one billion as a hush fee! He's a demon! This man is a real demon!

However, he didn't stop there.

“D-Do you think we can pay that much?!”

“Why do I feel like I heard something? Must be my imagination. Oooh, I know. Maybe I should see what the Dungeon Association and adventurers of Methylene think of what I just heard!”

“C-Cut that out, please.”

“...”

Clint said nothing; he simply stared down his opponent with expressionless eyes. The contrast with the wide smile on his face was kind of terrifying. Seeing that, I realized that I had better not make an enemy of him.



Once they were gone, Clint put a certain piece of paper into his pocket with a satisfied look on his face. He had made them write up a contract stating that they would give up Indole and pay one billion piros.

The moment they'd finished writing it, a magic circle had appeared on the paper. I assumed that meant it had some magic power—probably forcing the parties to abide by it.

I became even more scared of Clint knowing that he'd prepared that right after Alice went to go get him.

“So, the Indole problem is almost entirely resolved now,” he said.

“Is it?”

“Methylene has abandoned it, and one billion piros should suffice for infrastructure for the time being. The rest depends on tax revenue from the dungeon.”

“I see.”

That was a surprise. Based on what he'd said, it sounded like he was planning to use the entire one billion piros on Indole.

“Indole and Aurum will make plenty of money in the future. We'd best use this billion piros to the fullest.”

“Aurum?” I asked.

“That's the name of the dungeon.”

“Oh, so they've decided on a name?”

“Huh?” Clint grumbled, as if I'd asked an odd question. “Do you happen to think that we humans name dungeons?”

“Is that wrong?”

“When dungeons form, they already come with a name. We can see that name through magic.”

“Wow.”

That came as a surprise.

“There are theories that say the God of Land has some method for coming up with them, but nobody knows for sure.”

Clint might not have known the method, but I did. Tellurium, Arsenic, Silicon, Nihonium, Selenium, Aurum...

I wouldn't be surprised if Uranium appeared sooner or later.



Clint and I parted ways, then I returned to the village.

People quickly spotted me and started mobbing me. The chief stood at the front of the crowd and thanked me.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Sato!”

I had no idea why they were so grateful, really.

“Wh-Why are you thanking me now?”

“Alice told us everything! You didn't just free us from Methylene, but you've even secured a billion piro to develop the village!”

“Huh? How does Alice know all of that already? I only just finished speaking with Clint.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sato!”

“Thank you!”

“Thank you, benefactor!”

“You are the savior of our village!”

Villagers thanked me one after another. They were exaggerating at this point, calling me their savior.

“We need to reward our benefactor's kindness!”

“Oooh, yeah! We've got money and a dungeon now! It's time to grow this village with our own hands!”

“If we waste everything he's done for us, I'll never be able to look

him in the eye again!"

While the villagers pumped each other up, I remembered what Clint had said.

We'd best use this billion piros to the fullest.

The one billion piros thing had been misconstrued somewhat, as it was thanks to Clint's blackmail, but the villagers considered it my accomplishment. Thanks to that, they were more motivated than ever.

Perhaps this was part of using it to the fullest? I liked that thought. It was far better for them to be motivated than reluctant.

And yet... Hmm...

"We'd better go kick some monster butt!"

"Those stupid little demons are too weak!"

I didn't like what the youngest one there was saying. It seemed like he'd be the reason for another emergency before long.

...Ugh, fine. I guess I have no choice.

"Wait here," I told them.

"Where are you going, Mr. Sato?"

"I'll be right back."

I left the villagers to wait while I went back to where Clint and I had been. When I was back in the forest with nobody around, I took some specks of gold dust from my pocket and put them on the ground. I then stepped away and waited.

They turned into outsiders. I fired a restraining round, trapping all five of the outsiders. Then, I dragged them back to the village.

"M-Mr. Sato? What is the meaning of this...?"

"It's time for you guys to train. Form a circle and spread out."

The villagers did as directed. I then turned to the youngest man and said, "You there. You said the demons are too weak, right?"

"Y-Yes, sir."

"Okay. Try fighting this one."

I pulled the ropes off of one demon□since I made them, I could untie them easily□and pushed it toward him.

Despite his prior boasts, he was soon defeated. When the little demon was ready to deal the finishing blow, I fired a restraining round and then healed him.

“You rushed in too fast,” I scolded him. “I’ve said before that these guys are bullies. They play dead sometimes, too.”

“Y-Yes, sir... I’m sorry.”

“Can you still fight? Let’s try that again.”

I trained the villagers one after another. I knew more villagers would try to charge into the dungeon carelessly thanks to Clint’s actions, so I wanted to at least train them to protect themselves.



Alice and Eve watched from afar as Ryota and the villagers trained.

“That low level is a softie.”

“That’s just how Ryota is!”

“He’s doing a good job.”

“That’s why everyone respects him so much. They treat him like a god!”

“That girl and that girl look like they’re in heat.”

“You’re right! That’s exactly how you look at carrots.”

Without a word, Eve hit Alice with a fast chop. Alice blocked it with Bubbly. Their friendship was developing quite well.

While they watched, Ryota gradually gained even more trust and affection from the villagers without even realizing it.

Extra Side-Story: Watchbunny

After spending some time watching Ryota's training session, Eve walked away. Once she was alone outside the village, she sat in the shade of a tree, where she pulled out a carrot from her secret stash and gnawed on it.

This wasn't just any old carrot, however; it was one of Ryota's S-rank carrots. Though they were mere carrots from B2 of Tellurium, Ryota's S-rank drops produced carrots even more delicious and flavorful than branded goods.

Eve gnawed on the carrot, savoring every last bite. After finishing it, she toiled over a difficult question: should she eat another?

"That low level is a softie. He'll be here for a while."

They hadn't known each other long, but Eve knew him well enough. She was aware that such a softie wouldn't abandon people who were doing their best or facing misfortune. He would remain in Indole for quite some time, which meant she might run out of the carrots she'd brought from Cyclo. They weren't just carrots; they were precious Ryota carrots. If she ate another, she might run out during the later parts of their stay.

Should she eat? Or should she refrain? This was one of the hardest questions in Eve's life.

Ryota happened to wander by as she mulled over the matter.

"Oh, there you are," he greeted her.

"Low level."

"I've been looking for you. The villagers are having a banquet. You ought to come."

"Banquet?"

"Yeah. They'll have tons of good food."

“Will they have carrots?”

“No carrots. But they’ve got meat□”

“I don’t care,” Eve promptly replied.

To her, carrots were the only food. No matter how luxurious any other cuisine was, it did not hold up to her standards.

“They might not have carrots, but it’s a banquet. It’ll be fun.”

“I’m fine. Not interested.”

“Not at all?”

“Carrots for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. That is my happiness.”

“Figures,” Ryota chuckled and turned to leave.

Eve watched as he left. Once he was gone, she began spacing out under the tree.

Thanks to Ryota coming to talk to her, she’d managed to suppress the overwhelming desire to eat another carrot. Her carrot stash would last just a little longer as a result. With some gratitude in her heart, Eve sat around and relaxed.

The sun set and the moon rose high into the sky. Eve looked up at the moon, still sitting in the same spot, and she just...stared at it.

She didn’t know why, but the moon was her second favorite thing in the world. Eve especially loved the full moon. It wasn’t rare for her to spend a whole night staring at it. And today, she stared at it alone as usual.

At that moment, Ryota visited her once more.

“Hey, Eve.”

“You’re back, low level.”

“I brought you something.”

“Carrots?”

“No carrots. Try this instead,” Ryota said as he offered her something round and white on a plate. It was adorned with green leaves and something red, all in the shape of...

“A bunny?”

“Yeah, it’s a bunny. They had mochi and strawberry, so I figured I’d try making it.”

Ryota had brought a ball of mochi with leaves for ears and strawberry eyes, made to look like a rabbit.

“I just happened to remember that I used to make these on snowy days.”

“Good bunny,” Eve murmured.

“Yeah? It’s mochi, so it should be tasty.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m saying you made it good.”

“Oh, like artistically?”

Eve nodded and accepted it. She then gazed at it. Her usual expressionless look turned into a sad smile.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. See you later.”

“Okay. Bye-bye.”

She looked up and watched as Ryota left. He was a softie...but that wasn’t all he was. Ryota was considerate, too, as evidenced by him bringing the little bunny to her.

“Thank you...” Eve murmured, still smiling even after he’d left. Her eyes now focused on the white bunny instead of the moon.

Ryota had made this adorable little bunny for her. Eating it felt like a waste, so she just stared at it. After a long time□it was anyone’s guess how much time had passed□a shadow fell over the mochi rabbit.

Eve looked up and found thugs standing in front of her. Not just one□there were dozens, and they were all sporting evil grins.

“Hey. You a villager from Indole?” one of the men asked.

“No. I’m helping them.”

“Helping?”

Someone else piped up, “Hey, man, she’s gotta be one of those people they called to help with their new dungeon.”

“That so?”

Their grins widened. The sight would have made any normal person uncomfortable.

“Then how about we start with her, eh?”

“Start with?” Eve mumbled as she cocked her head. After a moment of thought, she hit upon something. “Are you hyenas?”

“You’re a smart one. That’s right. New dungeon, crappy villagers too weak to fight in it... How about you let us protect them instead?”

“And we’ll take all we can in the process!”

The men all laughed.

As a veteran adventurer, Eve knew how this worked. There were groups who would go to villages that had just gotten their first dungeon and attack the villagers there to bring it under their control. Most of those groups were made of people who were strong but had low drop stats. This one was probably made up of those types, Eve realized.

“...”

She thought for a moment and put the bunny in her cleavage before standing up.

“What? You wanna go?”

“Yeah, I’ll go,” Eve replied as she put her fingers together and thrust her hand out.

“Give it up. Can’t you see you’re way outnumbered?”

The men laughed again.

“In fact, how about you join us?” the leader urged her. “We wouldn’t mind letting you in. Maybe we can help you out, too.”

“Yeah, we’ll make ya feel real good!”

They laughed harder□lasciviously this time. Many of them made

their lust evident as they looked the bunny-suited girl up and down.

“How about it? Sounds good, right?”

“Sorry, but no.”

Eve simply shook her head. She glanced toward the village and heard the joyous yells of people enjoying their feast.

“I would be a failure of a bunny if I did not repay his carrots.”

“What? The hell are you?” the leader asked, but after her eloquent remark, Eve closed in at lightning speed and unleashed a slow-looking chop on his forehead. “Gaaack!”

His head split open and spewed blood.

“Bro!”

“What’s your deal?!”

“We’re not gonna go easy on you ’cause you’re a woman!”

Furious at their leader’s defeat, the men whipped out their weapons and attacked. They were good fighters, but they were nothing compared to Eve. The bunny-suited girl evaded their attacks like an elegant dancer and chopped them one after another. Blood and screams poured out from their mouths.

The dozens of ne’er-do-wells had been eliminated in an instant.

“N-No way... I didn’t think they’d have someone this strong!”

“Blood...rabbit ears, a bunny suit... It’s the Killer Rabbit!”

“This bunny is your mid-boss,” Eve declared. “If you can’t beat me, you’ll never survive against the low level.”

Some of them were still conscious, so she walked around and finished them off. Then, she hauled them off to discard them elsewhere.

Once she’d done all that, she returned and sat under the tree once again. She then grabbed the white bunny from between her cleavage and began gazing at it again as if nothing had happened.

After a while, Ryota returned from the village again.

“Heeey, Eve!”

“You’re back again, low level.”

“Don’t be so mean. Here, take this.”

“Is this...stew?”

“Yep. There are carrots in it☐”

Gulp!

She’d devoured the carrots alone before Ryota could even finish his sentence.

“That was fast! Also, at least eat the whole thing.”

“I’m fine with just the carrots.”

“Man, talk about hardcore. But fine...”

Ryota downed the rest of the stew himself and invited Eve again, “Are you sure you don’t wanna come to the banquet?”

“I’m fine here. I’m the watchbunny.”

Ignorant of what had happened here, Ryota raised an eyebrow and asked, “Watchbunny? What’s that supposed to mean?”

Eve remained silent, as she didn’t care to explain. It was normal for her to be taciturn, so Ryota brushed it off.

“All right, then. Are you gonna be here all night?” he asked.

“Yes. I’ll stare at my bunny and the moon.”

“Uh, okay then... Well, if I find any carrots, I’ll bring them over to you.”

“...Thank you. You’re a good person, low level.”

“Haha! C’mon, you’re exaggerating,” Ryota laughed and went back to the village. Eve saw him off and remained there, still gazing at the gift.

Villages with new dungeons were vulnerable. One could call them untapped profit potential, so a lot of people grew greedy upon learning about them. Eve, self-proclaimed mid-boss and watchbunny, remained outside the village and fought off all of the hyenas who

came.

Afterword

People write novels. Novels are written by people.

Nice to meet you all. Or wait, perhaps it's better to say that it's good to see you again? Either way, I'm Nazuna Miki, a Taiwanese light novelist.

Thank you so much for picking up volume 3 of *My Unique Skill Makes Me OP Even at Level 1*.

Thanks to all of you, we've made it to the release of the third volume. I really appreciate it!

This volume is similar in essence to the previous two. From sunrise to sunset□from bean sprouts to gold nuggets□Ryota Sato uses his unique S-rank drop stats to the fullest to perform great exploits in dungeons and rise up in the world to obtain everything his heart desires.

Our protagonist has gone from a shoddy, 20,000-yen apartment to being able to move hundreds of millions.

Of course, this isn't the end goal, since he's still working his way upward. He'll raise his stats, obtain skills and items, gain funds and friends.

Who knows if he'll ever stop rising up in the world?

This work continues to be published on *Shousetsuka ni Narou* as well. The web novel doesn't come with illustrations, but it *does* contain chapters 92 onward, so you can read ahead all you like there! It's being updated at a rate of one chapter every two days, and I've gotten over 45 million page views now!

If you've read this book and you want more of it right away, try visiting the web novel's page.

Finally, I have many thanks to give.

To Subachi-sama, who continues to create the most wonderful illustrations.

To K-sama, who continues to edit my awkward writing.

To the K Light Novel Books' editorial department, who made this publication a reality.

To the bookstores who stocked this book, as well as those of you who bought it.

I offer my deepest thanks to every single person involved in this work.

Now, I'll put down my pen, praying that the next volume will someday reach your eagerly waiting hands.

Respectfully Yours,

Miki Nazuna
February 2018

Author: Nazuna Miki

Formerly a wannabe voice actor, now a light novelist.

Margaret's basically the prototype Ryota. I started off with him being more like her, but I decided to make him stronger before I published anything.

A protagonist's gotta be strong, after all!

Illustrator: Subachi

I upload my illustrations early on Twitter,
so please give me a follow!

